

When the Wolves Come Home

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When the Wolves Come Home

by [Black Briar](#)

Summary

In which Tony would be more than happy to leave Bucky to die in a HYDRA base, but Steve attempts a rescue and everything goes wrong.

Notes

Hello again, lovelies! This story directly follows the events of [Long Shadows](#), which I recommend reading first though it may not be strictly necessary because I'll try to sum up any important information when it becomes relevant. Though let's be honest, I'm willing to bet a lot of you are here straight from part one so that summary probably won't be necessary!

I plan to update this story every other day. I know it's a downgrade from my once a day posting, but that definitely isn't sustainable long term so hopefully this will suffice! The extra time will also lend me the ability to get a head start on my next stories, which WILL circle back Peter and Tony's relationship in time. It's going to be brutal and heartbreaking and I can't wait!

With that being said...enjoy the first chapter of part two!

Grief

In retrospect, Bucky thought, going undercover had been a terrible idea.

When he'd been given the all clear on the removal of his programming, his first inclination had been to find HYDRA and absolutely decimate every remaining member so that nothing like what had happened to him could ever happen to anyone else. He'd had his life back, and he'd immediately wanted to use it for something good.

But of course, things were never that simple.

"You must rest," Shuri had told him, over and over again. "Your friends are dealing with HYDRA; there is no need for you to rush into battle. They are more than capable of continuing the fight without you."

Which he knew was true, of course. Steve had managed without him before (and indeed, had even managed *against* him), so it wasn't like he would die if Bucky took a break. But there was still this little voice in his ear telling him that Wakanda had fixed him for a *reason*, and that he should be doing what he could to fulfill that reason. HYDRA was still very much a threat, and that threat needed to be dealt with.

So he'd made probably one of the most terrible, ill-conceived decisions of his life.

It had seemed like such a good idea at the time. He knew HYDRA better than anyone. He knew how they acted, knew how they thought, knew how they moved—and most importantly, he knew how to blend in with them. So it had made perfect sense to go undercover.

He'd taken every precaution to make sure he wasn't recognized. Staying disguised wasn't much of a long shot to begin with, seeing as most of the people who had dealt with him were long dead and he doubted the ones that were still alive would recognize him without the eye makeup (something Steve *still* continued to tease him about relentlessly). But still, he trimmed his hair and changed his clothes and concealed his metal arm and even put in colored contact lenses. By the time he put on the cap and tucked his remaining hair up into it, he was unrecognizable. It worked, too—being recognized wasn't the problem.

The problem was being sold out.

He made it two months.

For those two months, he worked his ass off earning everyone's trust and climbing the ranks. Not climbing very *much*, mind you, as HYDRA was endlessly paranoid and two months wasn't enough time to make much of a dent—but he was getting there. He'd already gotten his eyes on a map of some of the remaining bases in the area. If he could just find out where *all* of them were, he could reach out to Steve and cut off all of HYDRA's heads at the same time.

But then those two months ended. One day he was just standing there, minding his own business, when Tony Stark's idiot intern walked into the room and ruined everything.

He wouldn't understand what was going on for a long time, that Steve and the other Avengers were dealing with a serious threat and that their problem had just blown his cover. Because the kid walked in, not even wearing his ridiculous spandex suit, and within the hour Bucky was being slammed against the wall and injected with something and chucked into a cold, dark prison cell.

At the time, he hadn't even been sure it was the kid's fault. But the timing was just a bit too convenient, for Spider-Man to show up covered in what looked like a rendition of Experiment 0600Y, splattered in blood and grinning like a madman, and for Bucky to call Stark and snap at him to come pick up his ridiculous, brainwashed child before something even worse happened, and for Bucky to be thrown behind bars.

But once he was actually behind those bars, none of that mattered.

All that mattered was that he was in the hands of the enemy, programming newly removed but entirely prepared to return, and all he could do was sit and wait and endure whatever was coming next.

I hope you're keeping an eye out for me, Steve. Because I could really use your help.

Three weeks after the Venom incident, as everyone had taken to calling it, everything seemed to have returned to normal.

Steve watched it all happen. He watched Peter finally get back on his feet, injuries healed, and return to training throughout the few weeks that remained of his summer vacation. He watched Tony completely freak out as Peter got back on his feet, certain that he was going to keel over at any moment. Then he watched that concern fade bit by bit, as the team fell back into normalcy and the compound was rebuilt around the damage caused by the HYDRA attack. He watched everyone return to their normal routines like nothing had ever happened.

Of course, there were *some* differences. Differences like Peter's new ability to heal around literally anything and catch entire buildings without breaking a sweat. Differences like HYDRA's renewed presence in Germany.

Differences like Bucky being gone.

To be fair, no one was really *sure* that Bucky was missing. They had evidence that he'd gone undercover, after all, and it was entirely possible that he was staying out of contact for the sake of maintaining his cover.

But Steve knew.

They already knew that Bucky had gone undercover at the same base that had worked on the Venom Project, because he had warned Tony when Peter arrived there. And if he'd warned them then, about a threat that wasn't even prepared to come for them, he would have warned them before HYDRA attacked the compound. He would have known it was going to happen. He would have called, just like he called the first time, and he would have warned them.

But he hadn't.

"You're overreacting, Cap," Tony had said. "He's lying low, you said it yourself. He knew we could handle a few HYDRA agents storming the place."

To which he'd responded, "Yeah. Except Bucky knew about the Venom Project, which meant that he knew how HYDRA was planning to use it. He wouldn't have risked our lives. He would have told us what was coming."

And Tony, rolling his eyes the whole way like the brat he was, had eventually been coerced into helping track down the wayward soldier.

The base where he had last been seen had been the logical place to start. They knew where it was, of course, as they had swept the area when destroying the last of Venom, so it had simply been a matter of returning there to see if they could find any traces of Bucky.

Of course, Tony was less than pleased by this development.

"I hate you for this, you know that?"

Steve shot a look back at Tony, who was pacing the interior of the jet as it neared the location. "I've heard that one before," he said.

"Yeah, but now I really mean it."

He recognized Tony's words for what they really were—a nervous attempt to take his mind off the situation at hand. But instead of engaging with it as he usually did, all Steve could do was stare out the window and pray that Bucky was down there. He'd already failed him once, leaving him for dead after he'd fallen off that cliff, and he wouldn't do it again. If Bucky was out there, he'd bring him home.

"Lay off him, Tony," Natasha said from her seat. "It's been a long couple of weeks."

"A long month, more like," Tony grumbled. "I've just barely gotten back from Wakanda and I'm already being asked to trek back to Germany to save your wayward boyfr—"

"Tony," Natasha said, exasperated. "This is serious."

"It's just a lot of airfare, you know? Especially to find someone we know for a *fact* is undercover. We'll just end up blowing his cover if we walk in there and decimate the place."

"We went to and from Germany three times to save Peter," Steve reminded him. "And we know that Bucky *was* undercover, not that he still is. His position may have been compromised after the Venom incident."

Tony made this face like he knew he was beaten, but didn't want to give it up. "I still don't like it. We're going in blind."

"The base was empty when we searched it a month ago, and it'll be empty now. If it's not, we'll take down whoever's in there."

"With just three of us," Tony clarified. "Because that's a great idea."

"Four!" Wanda called from the cockpit.

"Four," Tony amended.

The corners of Natasha's lips quirked upward, and she asked, "Who else were we going to bring? Vision and Clint are on guard duty, Peter is still on lockdown, and Bruce has Sam helping him in the lab. Not to mention, Rhodey will be back soon but he's not exactly mission capable. We're cleaned out here."

Tony snorted. "Let's hope that one super soldier, one highly-trained assassin, one powerful sorceress, and one genius in an impenetrable suit of armor are enough to take down the dozen or so

HYDRA agents that *might* be waiting in a rinky-dink base in the middle of nowhere."

Natasha shot him a look. "Let's hope."

Wanda called, "We're thirty seconds from the drop zone!"

Steve blinked at the sound of those words, brought back to the present. The jet slowed down, lowering slightly in preparation for the jump. Tony was quiet, probably running some kind of systems check on the internal coms. Natasha was checking the straps of her parachute. Wanda was stepping out of the cockpit and into the cabin, scarlet gathering at her fingertips.

"Let's do this."

The doors opened.

"Wait, Steve, your parachu—!"

But he didn't hear the rest, as he slipped past Natasha and threw himself out of the jet.

He had about ten seconds to get a glimpse of the German countryside before he was landing hard, rolling to avoid any serious damage. He had entirely too much experience falling from planes. Tony landed beside him a moment later, and a wash of red caught Wanda before she hit the ground.

"Steve," Natasha said, exasperated, before she even got the parachute off. "Do we have to go over the 'not throwing yourself out of moving planes' thing again? I really thought we'd covered that last time."

But he wasn't listening. Because the entrance to the HYDRA base was right there, a covered hatch leading underground, and Bucky could be a few moments away. There had been no one in this base when they'd cleaned it out a while back, but what if it was inhabited again? What if Bucky was down there, in danger and awaiting rescue? Or...what if he *wasn't*? What if he was somewhere else entirely, or already dead? What if—?

"Sense anything?" Tony asked.

Wanda shook her head. "It is far too early for that, Stark. Now come, let us descend."

Steve tried to prepare himself for the worst. As Tony approached the hatch and ripped it open, he tried to prepare himself for the possibility that Bucky might already be gone—either killed or swept off to a different base as a captive. Unfortunately he was well versed in losing his closest friend by this point, so it wasn't hard to prepare himself for the mind-numbing guilt and regret.

Except, nothing was there. When they dropped inside, no one was waiting to ambush them.

"Stay close," Natasha ordered in a low tone, while Steve was too busy staring to give orders. "We have no idea if there are still agents hiding in here, waiting to blast us into dust."

Steve neared the end of the initial hallway branching from the entrance hatch and saw that it spit out into a massive room, just like he remembered. He'd been on the team that had cleaned this place out after Peter's incident. He'd scoured nearly every inch of the base. But maybe now...

I wasn't looking for Bucky then. Now that I am, maybe I'll be able to pick something up.

They fanned out. Steve wasn't sure what he was looking for, dragging his fingers along the walls

and peering into every dark corner, but he knew that something *had* to be there. He needed a sign. He needed to know that Bucky was okay.

Wanda shook her head. "I'm not picking anything up."

"But we *know* he was here," Steve protested. "This is where Peter saw him working undercover."

"Yes, but my abilities are not so sensitive that I can detect him. He was here months ago, and clearly he was experiencing no strong emotions that would leave a traceable impact on our surroundings. To sense him now I need to come into contact with something that caused any kind of intense emotional response."

"Great." Natasha stepped away from a few empty lab stations. "Then if something seriously bad happened to Barnes, we'll know about it."

Steve wasn't sure if that made him feel better or worse.

"Hey. We'll find him, okay? He's going to be fine."

Steve nodded at Natasha, thankful for the empty comfort, and returned to his search.

"There's nothing here but dust," Tony complained, kicking at an empty box covered in said dust. It wasn't entirely true, though, because they were surrounded by the remnants of old lab equipment. Of course, S.H.I.E.L.D. had stripped that lab so it wasn't much more than cracked beakers and dented metal stations, and there wasn't a whole lot that could be done with it.

And of course, that meant there was no sign of Bucky.

"Let's search further in."

They wound their way deeper and deeper into the base. But every room was empty, and every time Steve looked hopefully to Wanda all she could do was shake her head and tell him *maybe well find something in the next room*. But they didn't.

They didn't find anything until they reached the detainment level.

Steve had searched this place too, back when he'd been working with S.H.I.E.L.D. to clean up the Venom Project. But now, looking at each individual cell felt like something entirely different. Now he knew that Bucky was missing, that he might have even been held in one of those cells, and it made his stomach twist.

When he saw dried blood spattered across the floor and up the walls, he couldn't stop himself from wondering if it was *his* blood. When he saw a long steel table with restraints on all corners, he wondered if Bucky had been strapped there because of Steve's negligence. When he saw Wanda wince, listening to something he couldn't hear, he feared that it was Bucky she was hearing. But each time she would look to him and shake her head, though she looked a bit more haunted than usual, and they would move on. Until...

"Hey, Cap?"

Until that.

"Might be something in here you'll be interested in!"

But the words weren't filled with Tony's usual flippancy. They were sharp and loud and just a little

bit alarmed, and Steve knew that something was wrong. He turned on heel and rushed out of the jail cell he was in, following Tony's voice to a cell at the end of the block. He was already calling for Wanda and Natasha as he stepped inside, and—

Oh, god.

There were massive dents in the walls, as if they'd been struck by someone with unnatural strength. Dried blood was flaking from the walls. There was a single chair in the middle of the cell that had been broken down into splinters. But the most horrifying part had to be the shards of metal scattered across the ground. Not because of the scarlet caked over them, or because of the jagged edges that looked like they could have been used as a knife, but because of the shape.

Silently, Steve knelt and picked what appeared to be a damaged metal finger. A part of a larger prosthesis, he knew, because he recognized it.

It was a part of Bucky's arm.

Natasha slipped into the room behind him and sucked in a sharp breath. "Steve..."

He grit his teeth. "Wanda. Take this."

He kept himself perfectly calm as he handed the chunk of Bucky's prosthesis off to Wanda. Or at least, he kept himself calm on the outside. On the inside he was in turmoil, holding proof that Bucky had been held in this room and he hadn't been able to do anything about it.

Wanda took the metal in her palm and frowned. There were hints of scarlet at the corners of her eyes as she watched whatever story the prosthesis was telling her. Judging by her sudden hiss of pain, it wasn't one that ended well.

"Wanda...?"

She held out a hand silently, and Steve stepped forward so she could show him, too.

Flashes. Flickers of color, of sound, of voices. Of *pain*.

"...you could hide, didn't you? Well we never..."

Walls denting beneath his fists. Concrete cracking under the unrelenting force of his metal arm.

"...can use him, sir. If Roland has failed—"

Pain, a jolt of electricity hitting him right in his core and bringing him to his knees.

"...should reprogram him."

Then panic. Crushing tightness in the chest and *no, don't let them take me back there don't let it happen again don't let go I can still escape—!*

"We don't have the tech..."

Blood. Crushing restraints around his wrists and knives put to his flesh, but never any questions. Never any purpose.

"...we can't reprogram him, then...use him to finish it. To kill them."

And finally, a decision. Not on his behalf but on that of the people who had found him out, and the

restraints were tightened and there was the prick of a needle at his arm and he was gone.

Steve recoiled like he'd been punched as the memories cut off there, and Wanda's hand left his face. *Bucky...*

Tony was there in a heartbeat, steadying him with one hand on his chest and the other on his back. "Steady, Cap! What'd you see?"

He...didn't quite have an answer. His head was still spinning from the influx of memories not his own, and knowing that Bucky had been here, had been in *pain...*

Wanda held up the piece of Bucky's metal arm. "He was here, Stark, and he was in pain. The memories associated with this thing are...*blurry*, to say the least. But we can be certain that HYDRA has figured out who he is, and that they are planning to do nothing good with that information."

Natasha raised a brow. "Do they think they can use him against us? Like a bargaining chip?"

"Perhaps," Wanda said. "Now that their attempts to assimilate us have failed, they could be searching for some other way to destroy us and leave the world vulnerable."

"Well they picked the wrong person," Tony said, sparks of aggression and bitterness in his voice. "If they think we're risking even one of our team on getting that murderer back—"

Natasha cleared her throat. "Tony..."

But Steve wasn't listening. They'd been lucky the last time Bucky had fallen into enemy hands. After the mess over the Sokovia Accords, getting him pardoned had been a miracle. But now, if something happened and he ended up on the wrong side of history for a second time...

Tony spared him a glance, but his demeanor remained cold. "Barnes is a killer. We've known that for years. And yeah, maybe he tried to redeem himself by—"

"*Tony*," Natasha repeated. "Without him it's very likely that Peter would be dead."

Tony stopped.

"Barnes saved Peter's life by giving us his location," Natasha pressed. "More than that, it's likely that contacting us was the thing that gave him away to HYDRA. Don't you think you owe it to him to at least *try*?"

Tony glared at the ground. Steve knew how he was feeling. Bucky had murdered his parents, even it hadn't *really* been his fault, and it was hard to forgive something like that. But he also knew that Natasha was right. Peter would be long gone if not for Bucky, and Tony owed him. They all did.

"Stark, please," Wanda said. "I have experienced firsthand what happens to those kept under HYDRA's care. We cannot in good conscience leave anyone to endure such torture."

Natasha nodded, placing a hand on Tony's armored back. "Not an option," she agreed. Then, to Steve, "We'll find him. We have your back."

He tried to say something to thank her, but his voice was caught in his throat. Bucky was gone, could be under the knife as he stood there doing nothing, and his heart felt about a thousand times heavier in his chest. That man in Bucky's memories had said that they couldn't reprogram him, but what if that changed since he'd been in this cell? It had also sounded like they were intending to use

him as a bargaining chip, but what if *that* had changed? What if Bucky was...?

Wanda reached out, no doubt sensing his turmoil, and placed the piece of Bucky's prosthesis in his hand. She was silent, but the touch she placed at his wrist said everything he needed to hear. She understood. She'd seen the memories too.

"Can you pick anything else up?" Steve asked, voice hoarse. "Just...*anything*."

"I'm sorry," Wanda said softly. "I showed you everything. We can continue to search, but I have a feeling that this is all we'll find. He has most likely been moved off base."

"Which means there's another base where he's being held," Natasha said. "And we'll find that base, and we'll get him home, and we'll take out HYDRA in the process."

"One head goes, two grow back." Steve looked down at the metal in his hand, fingers curling around it. "Every time I think we're safe, they take something from us. First with Peter, now with Bucky. How long will it be until we can't get someone back?"

"It won't be *now*," Natasha said with confidence. "We've gotten him back before, and we'll do it again. You have to trust us here, Steve."

"But—"

Tony raised a hand, and Steve fell silent. He knew that look.

"Natasha's right," he said, though he sounded a mix of bitter and resigned. "It's not just about Barnes, here. As long as we know HYDRA is still around, the whole world is at risk. So let's do it. Let's cut off another head."

Natasha shook her head and said, "How touching."

"Isn't it? Now Cap, snap out of it and let's finish sweeping the facility. Maybe there'll be something else here."

But Steve saw the spark of coldness in Tony's eyes, and he knew that he wasn't doing this for Bucky. He was only doing it to take out more of HYDRA's remaining troops, fulfilling a promise he'd made while Peter was still under Venom's control. Bucky meant nothing to him.

"What, cat got your tongue? Let's move!"

Steve wasn't willing to fight this battle while there was a chance he might find some trace of Bucky further into the base. He tightened his grip on the chunk of metal, grit his teeth, and moved forward.

But there was nothing. And by the time they returned to the compound, Steve was more agitated than ever.

Bargaining

Chapter Notes

Man, sorry this is later in the day than I would have liked! I've had an exhausting, emotional day with one of my poor cats (who will be fine, but he certainly gave me a scare), so I'm just DRAINED. But despite that, I did my best with this chapter and I really hope you guys enjoy it!

And of course, thanks for the support! I love hearing from you guys, so don't hesitate to let me know what you think so far!

When they reached the Avengers compound, everyone was waiting.

"They're back!" called Clint as Steve stepped off the plane. The archer was jogging toward them, the others not far behind. Even Bruce was there, in case Bucky was there and needed to be taken to the lab.

Steve stepped aside to let Tony, Natasha, and Wanda off the jet. Almost immediately they were moving to meet the rest of the team, while Steve stood back and watched. He still felt *numb* somehow, knowing he'd just had to leave Bucky behind in Germany to return to the compound. He'd wanted to stay, after the base had yielded no further clues, but the others had practically dragged him onto the plane and buckled him in. They'd insisted that if they wanted to find Bucky, it would take more than four Avengers running around blindly in Germany to do it.

Steve knew they were right. But that didn't make returning to New York any easier.

"Hey, Mr. Stark!" Peter bounced up to Tony like an overexcited puppy. "Did you find Sargent Barnes?"

Tony reached out and ruffled the kid's hair like the incredibly dysfunctional paternal role model he was. A lot of the time Steve wondered if he knew what he was doing, or if he was just turning Peter into a miniature version of himself. But then he had to see moments like *this*, where Tony dropped his flippant mask just to reassure a kid that wasn't even his, and he thought maybe he understood.

Though, maybe that was unfair. Peter really *was* Tony's kid, even if not biologically.

"Well he wasn't there," Tony said, speaking more to all of them than just to Peter. "But we did find evidence that Barnes *had* been there, so our next plan has to be tracking him down."

Peter's expression fell. "I *did* blow his cover, didn't I? He made that call to tell you where I was, and it got him caught."

"Not your fault, kid. You weren't in control." Tony looked to the others. "We appreciate the welcome party, but how about we move this thing inside? We'll have to come up with a plan of action."

So the group started to make their way inside, pairing off to talk in low whispers about what had transpired on the mission. Steve stepped out of the way to let Vision get to Wanda, as Natasha

drew up between Bruce and Clint. Tony patted Peter on the back to get him moving. Steve kept his head down, still trying to process the events of the past few hours. He was having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that Bucky was gone—*again*.

"Hey, Cap."

He jumped, looking up to see Sam standing in front of him as the others drew further and further away. "Sam," he greeted tightly.

Sam regarded him with a frown and said, "Haven't seen you looking this bad since the last time Barnes kicked your ass. What did you find in that compound, anyway? A dead body?"

Steve winced. They hadn't found Bucky's body, but he was well aware that if they kept looking—*when* they kept looking—that was a definite possibility.

"Woah, okay—that look doesn't suit you at all. Come on, what happened?"

"What always happens." Steve looked on ahead, where the others were nearing the entrance to the compound. "I get Bucky back, he gets taken again. HYDRA keeps causing problems."

Sam shook his head sympathetically. "That bad, huh?"

Steve squeezed his fingers around the chunk of Bucky's prosthetic. He hadn't let go of it since Wanda had put it in his hand. "I'm sorry," he tried. "I don't want to bring the team down, I just—I want this to be over."

"Yeah, I get it." Sam steered him in the direction of the compound, where the others had already vanished. "We're gonna get you fixed up. I know it hurts, knowing a friend is—what, dead? Captured? You're really not giving me a lot to work off of here. But either way, we'll work it out."

Steve glanced at him and said, "I thought you didn't like Bucky."

"Are you kidding me? I hate his guts."

"...Right."

"Look, it's just..." Sam paused. "I don't like Barnes. Tony doesn't like Barnes. I don't think *anyone* likes Barnes."

"Hey, I—!"

He raised a hand. "No one likes that guy but you. But you're *enough*, got it? We all stood by Stark when he needed to rescue that twerp, and we're all going to stand by you now."

"I think Peter and Bucky are a little different, Sam."

Sam stared. "*Both* of those idiots had their minds overridden by HYDRA and ended up hurting innocent people, trying real hard to put us down in the process. Are they *that* different?"

Steve hesitated. "Still, I'm not sure—"

"Well *I* am. We'll get Barnes back. I don't like it, but we'll do it. And if Tony tries to steer us off course, I'll smack him upside the head nice and hard."

"You'll cause more infighting is what you'll do," Steve said, but he was smiling now. He should have known that Sam would always have his back.

"Yeah? Then when the time comes, we'll deal with that infighting."

"Careful, Sam. You don't want to start another war."

"The hell I do, if Stark starts acting like a moron again!"

There was motion at the compound entrance, and then Peter was poking his head around the corner. "Hey, guys! Mr. Stark says to hurry up!"

Sam shot him a look and said, "Let's get in there before he explodes from excitement. Deal?"

Steve smiled a little, for the first time since he'd stepped into that jail cell. "Deal."

By the time they made it inside, Tony was already going over what they'd found. The others were dead silent as he described the scene inside that jail cell. The blood crusted to the walls. The dents in the walls. The shards of Bucky's arm, no doubt ripped right from him without a second thought.

Then he was done, and everyone was staring in shock. Steve slid into his seat, Sam lowering himself down beside him.

"So that's it, then?" Clint asked. "We have no clue where he is."

Natasha said, "We don't even know if he's in Germany. HYDRA is everywhere, and if they've had as much time to move Barnes as we think they've had..."

"He could be anywhere," Wanda agreed. "But HYDRA seemed intent upon using him against us, so I imagine that they will attempt to leverage him as a bargaining chip. They may be in contact soon."

Tony shrugged and pointed out, "Unless they're pumping him for information before they make contact. Best of both worlds for them, isn't it? They have us on the ropes, plus they get some nice, juicy information about whatever the hell it is they want."

"What could he possibly know that they would be interested in? He's barely an honorary Avenger; he's only ever been here a few times."

"HYDRA's always had a thing for trying to kill Cap, right? Maybe they want information on him."

Steve looked up at that, stomach twisting into knots. That would mean that not only had he not noticed Bucky's absence in time, but that he'd been taken because of him in the first place. He was no stranger to guilt, but...he couldn't help the surge of unease that swept over him.

Sam shot him a glance. "If they're going to use Barnes against us in any way, then we need to make sure he's found immediately. The question is *how*, what with the massive amount of ground we have to cover in a short period of time."

"HYDRA bases aren't impossible to find," Tony pointed out, though there was something sour in his expression. Steve knew exactly how happy he was to be rescuing the man that had killed his parents. "If they're still running experiments like the one that put Venom here, they'll be using a lot of power. We can scan for unusual fluctuations in energy, strange groupings of heat signatures in the middle of forests, any unusual traffic in supposedly uninhabited zones...the usual. I can have the drones out in twenty to scan the most probable locations. Isn't that right, FRIDAY?"

"The drones are already on standby, boss."

"You're the best. So, does that sound like a plan?"

Everyone nodded.

"Perfect. I'll send them out to play 'find the hundred-year-old sociopathic murderer before he betrays us and-or murders a dozen more people,' and we can meet back here before dinner."

Steve stiffened. "Tony..."

"Don't *Tony* me, Cap! You know what Barnes did as well as anyone. He caused all of our infighting a year back."

"Technically *I* caused it," Wanda said drily. "Suicide bomber, remember? That was the true beginning."

Tony pointedly refused to look at her. "Barnes didn't help."

"Help or no, he did not cause our problems. You cannot blame him for things that were beyond his control. Or are we now holding *all* of our team accountable for such actions?"

Peter shifted nervously. "Hey, um..."

"*No*," Tony said quickly, sparing the kid a glance, "we are most certainly *not* doing that."

"Then you cannot presume to blame Barnes for what happened in the past."

Tony looked like he had something stuck in his throat.

Wanda turned to Steve. "The drones will be sent out at once. When they find something, we'll go there together and kill those that have taken your friend prisoner." Then, to the rest of them, "Are we in agreement?"

Tony stared at his shoes and said nothing. Steve knew that there was a conversation waiting to happen there, that sooner or later he'd have to talk to Tony and try to straighten this whole thing out. They'd made an attempt once, back when the Sokovia Accords were still on the table and they were seriously moving toward a schism, but...it hadn't ended well. As in, punches had been thrown. Hard punches. But Steve also knew that this couldn't go on forever. Bucky was his best friend, his *partner*—and Tony needed to understand that.

He just hoped that their inevitable confrontation didn't end in blood.

"No objections?" Wanda asked. "Good. Stark, send the drones."

Tony's jaw tightened, but he didn't try to argue. "Yeah, sure. FRIDAY?"

"*Already done.*"

"Great. Perfect." Tony crossed his arms. Uncrossed them. Crossed them again.

Steve saw Wanda shoot a glance at Peter, something nonverbal passing between the two of them. Then Peter was getting to his feet and taking Tony by the arm and saying, "Hey, Mr. Stark, why don't we go work on that suit upgrade while the drones work? We were really close to figuring out that vibranium mesh stuff, right?"

Good kid, Steve thought, watching Peter start dragging the man out of the room. It would be good to keep Tony occupied for a while. If he was preoccupied with Peter, he wouldn't put his mind to

getting into a fight with anyone (i.e. *him*) over Bucky.

"Peter has the right idea," Natasha said, pushing herself to her feet. "Steve, why don't you come with me for training today?"

"I'm in too!" Clint said, shooting out of his chair. "I've been cooped up here for weeks, Nat, I need to burn off some energy!"

Wanda rose gracefully. "I will also join you. I fear Tony's temperament at the moment, and if he were to attempt a confrontation..."

Everyone went quiet for a moment, the reality of that statement sinking in. No one wanted a repeat of the Sokovia Accords, but with the direction this was heading in...

"Then it's settled," Natasha said. "Let's go."

For the hundredth time that hour, Bucky threw a punch at the door. And for the hundredth time that hour, all he was met with was a mess of shrapnel and absolutely no give to the steel.

He shouldn't have been surprised. The HYDRA agents had torn his arm to tatters in the process of sedating him back at the first base, and it was a miracle it was still as functional as it was. He was even missing a *finger*. And losing it had done him no good, as he'd been knocked clean out and presumably transported to another base entirely soon after. He barely even remembered the struggle before the needle had slid into his arm. All he had now were the bruises and cuts to remind him of what had happened.

And since then...

Bucky finally stepped back from the door and let his back hit the wall, sliding down to sit atop the cold stone. He didn't know how long he'd been in this second cell. There were no windows and no way of indicating how much time had passed, so for all he knew it could have been days or weeks. He'd been fighting the whole time, on no food and little water, and he was beginning to feel it. HYDRA's little visits certainly hadn't helped.

They wanted everything. Weaknesses, blind spots, loopholes in security systems. They wanted him to load the gun so they could fire it, but he refused to let it happen. He'd been their puppet before, but not again.

So they hurt him, and he wasn't surprised. He'd endured their torture before. Starting slow, with knives in his skin, with needles, and moving up to burns and asphyxiation and slow, crushing force on his bones that he *refused* to react to. He'd dealt with it all in the past. As long as they didn't have the tech to reprogram him, he was safe.

Well—safe being a relative term. He was well aware that they could kill him at any given time, and it would be over.

He closed his eyes and let the back of his head rest against the wall. He was covered in a flurry of cuts and burns and bruises, so the action only made him feel marginally better. But that was okay. As long as he was still himself, it was okay.

Steve is out there, he reminded himself. He's looking out for me. He'll realize what's happened, and he'll find me.

It was a lot to ask of the man. He knew that. But if HYDRA truly intended to use him as some kind bargaining chip at some point, perhaps after either getting their information or realizing that they weren't going to be able to torture him into breaking, then the Avengers would know soon enough that he was with HYDRA. Once they realized what was going on, Steve would come for him.

Or he won't, and you'll be left here to rot.

He shook the voice out of his head. He'd seen firsthand how Steve was willing to fight for him, and he knew he'd be willing to do it again.

And what if he gets hurt because of you? What if that's HYDRA's plan? After they wring you for information they use you to lure the Avengers here, prepared to kill them, and they do just that. They were working on the Venom Project before you were captured. Steve and the others know that, but knowledge won't make a difference if they don't have some way to combat the effects.

Unless the Avengers had already dealt with Venom, in which case...was HYDRA planning something else? Something he didn't know about, because he'd been captured before he'd heard of it?

No, no—I can't think about that now. It's out of my hands.

And it was. For now, Bucky knew he only had one job—to stop himself from in any way betraying Steve and his team.

Footsteps sounded outside the cell, and Bucky opened his eyes. They were back. Vaguely he wondered what it would be this time. The knives, or the branding irons, or the hot plates, or the chemical cocktail that made him see stars for hours.

The lock turned. He got to his feet, ready for combat even though he knew that the instant the door opened—

A low hiss filled the room, and Bucky's vision went blurry. A sedative, designed to make him compliant without losing consciousness. He swayed.

"...not going to get anything out of him; it might be time to contact the Avengers."

"They'll only storm in here and kill us, you know that."

"Not if we play this right. It's almost ready, remember? Experiment 0600Y was a minute step in a larger plan, and if we can just finish up the rest—"

"Shut up, moron! He might be able to hear you."

The door slid open, and two HYDRA goons were suddenly standing before him. He snarled and raised a fist, ready to attack, but one slammed a baton across the side of his head before his sluggish muscles could be convinced to react. He hit the ground and stayed there, groaning from the force of the impact.

"Get him up," one of the men snapped. "It's time to send a message."

"Cap, we've got something!"

Steve almost dropped his coffee at the sound of those words, whipping around to face the woman that had just stuck her head around the corner. "Nat? What's going on?"

She gestured back down the hallway, eyes wide. "Tony just called. We've got a broadcast coming in from HYDRA, and we all have to get there *now*. It's about Bucky, I'm sure."

His heart plummeted. "Where?"

"Conference room."

And he ran. Natasha was hot on his heels as he wove through the hallways, nearly clipping a few corners in his hurry to get up there and know what was going on. For all he knew, Tony and the others were already watching HYDRA as they displayed Bucky's lifeless body.

Then he rounded the final corner, and he was staring at a nightmare.

"Bucky—!"

Immediately the entire team was shushing him, their attention trained on the screen at the head of the room. On it were two HYDRA agents in masks, each holding a gun. And between them...

"You will meet our demands, or we will slaughter your friend."

Steve's blood ran cold. *What? But that doesn't make any sense! Why would they destroy someone they could just reprogram and use as a weapon against us? What are they thinking? Unless...is there some reason they're not able to reprogram him?*

Natasha tapped frantically at one of the computers against the far wall. "Tony, do you have a lock on the point of origin?"

"Not yet, so let's hope the signal doesn't cut out." Tony squinted at the television screen, then back at his computer monitor. "Come on, come on..."

"It is likely that you will doubt our truthfulness," one of the men continued. *"Perhaps you won't trust our resolve to destroy a weapon of our own creation, should it come to that. Allow me to persuade you otherwise."*

Steve looked away, but he still heard it. He still heard the crack of bone, and Bucky's pained cry. He barely seemed conscious, hanging there in between the two, but he was at least aware enough to scream. Steve almost wished that he wasn't.

"Should you attempt to stop us, he will die. We have a loaded gun to his head at all times, and we will pull the trigger if we detect even a hint of your interference."

"Tony, the location!"

"Working on it, working on it!"

"Now that you trust our severity, you must meet our conditions in order to keep Sargent Barnes alive. Our...will be as follows... go to...and make...terminate the..."

"Tony!"

"I'm losing the signal, there's nothing I can do! Something's—!"

"...meet our...unless...kill..."

Steve took a helpless step forward as the screen fizzed over, and the agent trying to tell him how to keep Bucky alive dissolved into static. The signal was gone.

Tony slammed his fist against the table. "That was *meant* for us, damn it, how the hell did the signal get cut off? Are they *taunting* us? Was it intentional?"

Natasha kept tapping at the keyboard, but Steve didn't know if she was actually doing anything. "How close did you get to the point of origin?"

Tony ran a hand through his hair. Anger was practically radiating off of him. "I have a thirty mile range, and the signal could have come from anywhere inside it."

"Where?" Steve asked, breathless. "Where is he?"

"Somewhere in Germany, just like we thought. He's in the countryside."

"Then let's get out there! We have a probable location, and—"

"And you want Barnes *alive*, don't you?" Natasha broke in. "You heard those guys; if they detect us in the area they'll kill him."

"They'll be killing their leverage! They wouldn't dare!"

"They *will*, and you know it. We have to be smart about this."

Steve opened his mouth to protest, itching to run, to fight, to get him *back*, but in the end he just had to take a deep breath and keep his hands at his sides. He couldn't act impulsively. Bucky's life depended on it.

"What do you suggest?" Steve asked finally.

Natasha looked to the others, who were still standing in stunned silence. "A stealth mission. A small team built for search and rescue."

"It'll be risky," Clint warned. "Even a small team might get spotted. And if we do send in a team with only three or four people, how are they expected to take out a whole base? We have no idea how expansive this operation is."

"That's a risk we're going to have to take," Natasha said. "Right, Steve?"

He jolted. "Right, right...let's do that."

Tony pushed away from the computer. "Great, I'm in. Cap, you'll have to go with me of course, and —"

"I said *stealth*, Tony," Natasha corrected. "Your suits are anything but discreet."

"What? But I'm the star of the show, the—!"

Natasha shook her head. "*Stealth*. Not bright lights and flashy metal suits."

"Then who *should* go? I thought I was a shoe-in!"

"Hey, um..." Peter raised a hand nervously, like he thought he'd get smacked for speaking up. "I don't want to bug you guys, but my suit literally has a reconnaissance mode."

"Perfect," Natasha said, at the same time that Tony whipped around and snapped, "*Like hell you're going!*"

Peter jumped. "I—I—I have the suit! It's designed to cloak everything, Mr. Stark, you know that! No scanners will be able to pick me up. Plus, I can actually do some serious damage while staying quiet!"

Tony looked like he was a half step away from an aneurism. "Kid, I swear to god. You just got your feet beneath you last week, and now you want—!"

"He's right, Tony," Natasha broke in. "If we want to go for stealth, a lot of our heavy hitters will have to stay here. You, for one. Vision and Sam will have to be out too. The wings only marginally quieter than your suits, even though Vision is powerful he's not nearly as discreet as what we need. That leaves Steve, Clint, Wanda, Peter, and me."

"Steve isn't that stealthy," Tony attempted.

"Bucky is *my* partner," Steve said shortly. "I need to be there."

Tony looked away. "Still not stealthy," he muttered.

Natasha rolled her eyes and said, "*Regardless*. We need as much power as we can get on this mission, and that means loosening your iron grip on control."

Steve watched Tony look back and forth between Peter and Natasha, shoulders hitched. For a moment Steve wasn't sure if he was going to do it. But then the man sighed and said, "*Fine*. Kid, you owe me for this."

"For letting me help people? Come on, Mr. Stark!"

"For letting you put your life in danger rescuing some brainwashed super soldier who—!" Tony cut himself off, fingers curling into fists. "You know what? Never mind. Just...Rogers, if he's not back in one piece then I'm taking it out on you."

Peter put a hand over his chest, right where Venom had infected him not a month prior. "I've got this now, remember? It'll take a lot more than a few HYDRA agents in a rickety hideout to take me down."

Looking at his fierce expression, Steve almost believed him.

"All right then," Natasha said, looking from face to face "I'm giving us one hour to suit up and gather whatever we need for the journey. Then we'll head out, and search until we find the base. We'll get Bucky home within the week."

And again—Steve almost believed her.

The Countryside

Chapter Notes

This is a bit of a shorter chapter, because I'm saving all the good stuff for next time. I'm so very excited to get to the meat of this story in the next chapter! I'm very pleased with how it's turning out.

And of course, thanks for the support! I love hearing from you guys so don't hesitate to comment and keep me going!

The jet swooped low over Germany, Tony's newly perfected stealth mode keeping it from being detected. They were still a few miles off the landing point, which was itself a few miles off the thirty-mile radius they needed to search. They could have dropped closer, but everyone agreed that they were less likely to appear on any of HYDRA's scans if they left the jet further out and went in on foot.

"Three minutes," Clint said as if on cue. He was standing at the window, looking down at the forest below. "We've got our coms synced up, right?"

Steve tapped at the piece in his ear. "We'll be able to talk to each other from anywhere without fear of detection."

"Which is good if we're splitting up," Natasha said. "Hopefully one of us will be able to find something before too long. Maybe we should make a competition out of it."

Clint snorted, "Come on, that's not fair in the slightest! Steve sprints like a goddamn gazelle, Peter's got webshooters to swing all over the place, and Wanda can pretty much fly anywhere she wants!"

"Are those excuses I'm hearing, Clint?"

He raised his hands. "No way! Not excuses, just...observations."

"That's what I thought. Now, first one to find the HYDRA base gets first shot at the asshole that made us come all the way out of here." Natasha got to her feet. "Time?"

"One minute."

Steve stood up as the plane began its descent. The others were checking their coms, adjusting their suits, and preparing to slip unseen into the forest. The jet would leave them there to minimize the risk of being spotted, so they would be on their own once they hit the ground.

"Thirty seconds..."

The plane settled, and the doors opened.

"Move out!"

They stepped outside into the clearing the plane had landed in. All around them was dense forest,

but somewhere out there Steve knew there was a HYDRA base lying in wait.

"Well," Wanda said, "see you soon." Then she was off, carrying herself with her powers in the appointed direction.

"Guess that's our cue!" Clint made sure his bow was slung over his shoulder, then started off in another direction. "Lousy enhanced superheroes, not having to do things the *hard* way..."

Natasha rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. She said nothing as she chose another direction, waved, and started moving out.

That just left Peter, who grinned at Steve in excitement and offered him a salute. "Good luck, Captain Rogers!" Then he was firing a web into the trees and yanking himself off the ground, vanishing into the forest.

Steve adjusted his shield, making sure it was strapped firm against his back, and took his first few steps into the forest.

It was going to be a long search.

A great while later, Steve was beginning to reach the end of his rope.

He'd been searching for hours, slipping through the forest as silent as a mouse for fear of being detected, and he hadn't found a thing. He was beginning to wonder if the signal had just been a setup to lure them to the German countryside, and if they were just walking into an ambush. He was so engrossed in searching for the hidden base that he almost didn't hear his communicator go off when it did, alerting him that someone was attempting to get in contact.

He raised a hand to his ear. "Tony? Is that you?"

"Got it in one."

Suspicious, Steve glanced around him for any sign that he was being monitored. But there was nothing, so he quickly ducked down behind a tree and whispered, "What's going on? This isn't a good place to talk, if HYDRA finds us they'll kill Bucky!"

"I know, I know. It's just—look, Cap, you've been searching for what's coming up on twelve hours, and you haven't found a thing."

He blinked. *Twelve hours?* Had it really been that long? He'd barely even noticed the steady transition into night.

"It's beginning to look like Barnes isn't there," Tony went on, voice tight. *"And the longer you're out there, the more danger you're all in. I'm asking you to come back in."*

"What?" he snapped. "Bucky is still out here! I can't leave him behind!"

"All we know is that he was there, not that he's there now. It's possible they already moved him, in which case you're wasting your time. Don't you think five superheroes in a thirty mile radius would have been able to find a base if it really existed?"

"The call didn't come from nowhere. Even if Bucky's gone, that base is still here and we have to find it. There might be more clues waiting for us."

Tony groaned. *"Rogers, what did I just say? The longer you're there the more dangerous it gets for all of you. Come back now, before someone gets hurt!"*

"Why are you so determined to get me off of this?" Steve asked, practically bristling with anger. He knew that Tony hated Bucky, but he'd convinced himself that he didn't hate him enough to purposefully leave him for dead. "You owe him, Tony! You owe him Peter's life!"

"Yeah? Well maybe that's a little hard to believe when I'm talking about the man that slaughtered my parents! The way I see it, I owe him nothing. Saving Peter repaid a debt he already owed."

Steve's stomach twisted. "I can't believe how selfish you're being! Bucky's out here, hurt and awaiting rescue, and—!"

"I'm selfish? Me? I'm sorry, but am I the one that made half the team trudge out to Germany and walk around aimlessly in a forest in search of a mass murderer? Am I the one that's putting their lives at stake? Because I'm pretty sure that's you, Cap! And that seems pretty damn selfish from where I'm standing."

"Tony—!"

But the man spoke right over him. *"I just don't get it, Rogers. It's barely been a year since the Sokovia Accords were shot down, it's been even less time than that since we roped the team back together, and here you are wanting to jeopardize all that again!"*

"If looking for Bucky is jeopardizing the unity of the team, that's on *you*. Everyone here is more than willing to look for him, to forgive him. But for some reason, you won't understand that his actions were out of his control!"

"He murdered my parents." It was said almost calmly, but Steve had known Tony long enough to detect the poison in his voice. *"I don't want to risk anyone's life saving that man. Not even yours."*

"That's not your call," Steve bit out. "Everyone I brought agreed to be here. I didn't force them."

"Only because they don't understand that Barnes is a murderer!"

Steve shook with tension, and he almost wished that Tony had been there so he could take it out on someone. *Almost.* "Natasha understands. She's fought him; she knows what he's capable of. But she also understands that it's *not his fault*. He was programed to kill, and now that programing is gone and we can *trust* him. Clint understands it too, and so does Wanda. They're standing beside me because they know that Bucky is innocent!"

Tony snesered, *"I shouldn't be surprised. You've brought to Germany the same team that stood beside you while the Accords were still on the table. Except this time you've dragged Peter into it too, and if he gets hurt on your pointless quest to rescue Barnes then I will never forgive you."*

"Is that really why you were so afraid to send him here?" Steve demanded. Something was sliding into place in his mind, and it made his hair stand on end. "Were you really afraid he'd just get hurt, or were you afraid that the schism would open again and *we'd* do the hurting?"

"My kid is alone on a team of people who once tried to smash my head in," Tony spat. *"Forgive me for feeling nervous."*

"So this *is* about the infighting. Are you really prepared to go down that road again, Tony? Because I can guarantee you that it won't go any better for you than it did the first time."

"Is that a threat, Captain?"

"Only if you want it to be, *Stark*."

There was this thick, awful silence, then, hanging between them like a storm cloud. It was all the trauma of the Sokovia Accords and then some, as Steve tried to keep himself as calm as possible. He couldn't afford to fight this battle right now; he had a partner to save.

"The people here are going to stand by me," Steve said finally, keeping his voice low.

"We *will* rescue Bucky, and he *will* be brought back to base as an Avenger. And if you attack him, you'll have us to deal with. *All* of us."

"Try me, you star-spangled wannabe. You come after me, I'll hit you where it hurts."

Steve curled his fingers into fists. "Then let's hope it doesn't come to that, because I'll have to do the same to you."

"If you come after my—!"

Steve jumped, caught off guard by the sound of machinery whirring not too far off. "Tony, shut up!"

"Don't tell me to shut up! Are you actually trying to tell me to shut up in the middle of an argument? I'll beat you so hard that shield breaks, Cap, don't test me!"

"Tony," he hissed, "be quiet! I think I've found it."

Tony immediately went quiet.

Keeping low, Steve crept toward the source of the noise. There was a line of trees in front of him that seemed to give way to a clearing, and his heart leapt as he realized that *this was it*. When he came up on the edge of the treeline, he saw two HYDRA agents emerging from what looked like a hatch in the ground. The whirring was coming from some kind of locking mechanism.

"I have it," Steve whispered. "I'm calling the others, then we're going in."

"Rogers—!"

"We'll be safe," he said, because he knew that was why the man sounded so panicked. "Not all of us are like you, Tony—we're not going to do anything to the kid. Not unless he attacks us first under your orders."

Tony made a choking sound, trying to respond, but Steve ended the call before he could get out a single word. Then he was connecting to the other channel and whispering, "I've got eyes on the base!"

"What? No way, really? That's awesome, Captain Rogers!"

Then, from Wanda, *"I'm inbound to your location. Clint, I can pick you up along the way since you're the farthest out."*

"Approach with extreme caution!" Steve commanded, glancing at the HYDRA agents. They appeared to be heading off on some kind of patrol. Their weapons were drawn. "We've got patrols

going out now, heading northwest. If they spot any of us, Bucky doesn't stand a chance."

"Then we'll make sure they don't spot us," said Natasha. "We're on our way. Take cover until we arrive."

Steve nodded. "I'll keep all eyes off me."

"Good. We'll be there in ten."

"What happened to ten?" Steve asked when Natasha arrived fifteen minutes later, the last of the group to reach the meeting point.

"Pardon me for not having anything more impressive than my legs to get me around," Natasha said, elbowing him. "So that's it, is it? The entrance to the base?"

Steve glanced over to the hatch. He had no doubt that there were cameras everywhere, so he'd moved a ways away to talk securely. They needed a plan.

"How do we get in?" Peter asked, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. "It's just one hatch, and it *has* to be secured pretty heavily."

Wanda nodded to the place where the guards had vanished some time ago. "The uniforms," she said. "It will be risky, but we might be able to snatch a few in order to enter the building undetected. From there, we can locate Bucky and make sure he's not at risk. If we can do that..."

"Then we won't have any fear in busting the doors down and taking him back," Natasha said. "Good thinking. The issue will be getting those uniforms without somehow alerting the agents inside the base. For all we know they can tell if an agent goes down and their uniform is removed."

"Wouldn't put it past them," Steve said. "But at this point, we have to get in there and save Bucky." The longer they waited, the higher the chance became that he would die or be tortured into giving up vital information. Getting the uniforms would be a risk, but it was one that they would have to take.

Natasha nodded to Peter. "You're our best bet for getting those uniforms without a fuss. You're quiet and strong, and you can keep off the ground without much of a struggle. Think you can handle it?"

Peter nodded. "I've got it. How many do we need?"

Steve did a quick head count. Then he paused and realized, "We shouldn't send everyone in, otherwise it might look suspicious. We should just send two or three of us to scout the place and report back."

"Me, then," Natasha said. "I have a feeling my past experience will make blending in a breeze."

"And me," Peter said quickly. "I'm not as smooth as you, but I'm about the right size and strong enough to fight my way out if I get caught."

Steve was reminded then of Tony's threat—that he'd try to kill him if anything happened to Peter—and for a moment he almost refused. But then he realized that he was being idiotic, that the kid

was *stronger* than him at this point, and he didn't say a word.

"Then it should just be the two of us," Natasha said. "Sorry, Steve, but you're way too big to pass for normal HYDRA agent. We want to appear perfectly average."

He nodded. "I get it, Nat. No need to apologize. Just...report back the instant you have something, okay?"

"Of course." She looked up. "Peter, the uniforms?"

"Oh—right! I'm pretty sure I remember the last set of guards going in...that direction?" He paused. "Karen, can you...? Oh, great! Thank you!" Then he was off the ground, vanishing into the trees like a shadow.

Natasha turned back to Steve and said, "Once we're in there we'll have to work fast. We'll find Barnes and radio you the instant we have his location. If it's safe for you to attack, you can burst in with everyone and we'll clean the place out. If it's not, we'll figure something out to *make* it safe."

"Good." Steve reached out, clasping a hand to her shoulder. "I trust you with this, Nat. You'll do fine."

She offered him a smile and didn't protest.

The next hours moved quickly.

Peter returned and dropped two uniforms on the ground, a smile on his face. Then he changed, Natasha following suit, until the two were unrecognizable beneath the uniforms. Then they moved forward as if returning from patrol, stepped inside the hatch, and when Steve didn't immediately hear screaming over the coms he knew that it had worked.

"We're in," Natasha whispered, and Steve's heart stopped racing quite so fast. *"There were four guards just inside the hatch, but they didn't stop us. We're heading further in now."*

"It's so cramped!" Peter complained, his voice accompanied by the rustling of his uniform. *"I feel like I can't breathe in this thing, and the base is full of these weird tunnels with like, no room to breathe!"*

"That's coming from a superhero in spandex," Wanda said warmly. "Just focus, Peter."

"I am, I am!"

After that, more waiting. Steve was on standby as Natasha and Peter wove their way through the base's cramped tunnels, a few close calls setting him on edge. But eventually they did make it to the lower levels, where the prisoners would have been kept. If Bucky was there, he'd be in one of those cells.

"We're moving in," Natasha said. *"There are guards down here...we won't be able to enter one of the cells without taking care of them, but once we do the cameras will pick up what we're doing."*

"Can you at least look inside to see if Bucky's safe?" Steve asked.

"We'll try. Peter, stop looking so conspicuous!"

"I'm sorry, I've never done this before!"

The channel dissolved into whispered bickering for a moment, as Peter and Natasha approached the cells.

Then, *"Nothing in this one."* And a moment later, *"Nothing in this one either...stay calm, let's keep moving."*

"I don't see anyone in these cells either!"

Steve's breath grew shorter as they moved. They could be discovered at any moment, and Bucky could die. Until...

"Oh my—we've got him! Steve, he's here!"

His stomach lurched. "How is he? Is he okay? What does he look like?"

"I...I can't tell, I'm sorry. He's alive, but he's sitting in the corner and his hair is covering his face. We won't be able to perform an extraction without blowing our cover."

"Is he in immediate danger, or are we free to move in?"

Another pause. *"I don't see anything, but that doesn't mean there's nothing there. We'll have to move quickly, just in case there's a security system meant to kill him."*

"Should we move in?"

"Affirmative. All three of you, attack now! You'll provide a distraction as we rip the door open and get Bucky out."

Steve nodded. "Sounds good to me. Move out!"

The coms went dead just a moment after Steve heard the sound of tearing metal. Then he was leaping to his feet, Wanda and Clint behind him, and bashing his way through the hatch with his shield.

Bucky was waiting for him.

The Fall

Chapter Notes

I very much enjoyed writing this chapter, so I hope you guys enjoy reading it just as much! And as always, I'd love to hear from you guys if you do! Comments are what keep me going.

Also, I am going on vacation Sunday through Thursday, but I'm going to do my best to have chapters up anyway. If an update does go mysteriously missing, though, you'll know why!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Bucky heard it when a new set of guards entered the space outside his cell, and it made him pause. He'd gotten a feel for the guards' rhythm, and they never changed shifts this quickly. They always came in, stood for hours, then left. But these new guards had walked in after only ten minutes, and the old guards hadn't left once, and he knew that something was amiss

So when the door to his cell was suddenly torn off, he was only marginally surprised.

He blinked in surprise at the person standing there, the metal door molded around his hands as he quite literally tore it from its hinges. The person was dressed as a HYDRA agent, but he sure wasn't acting like one.

"Woah!" he gasped. "I knew I was stronger now, but that was just insane!"

Bucky pushed himself to his feet, backing away just in case the person became hostile. The movement *hurt*, damn it, all his cuts and burns pulsing as one as he moved. It wasn't so bad that he couldn't walk or fight, but it was getting there. He'd barely eaten in what felt like a week, and he was a little light-headed. But if it came down to staying in that cell or taking down what sounded like a kid...

Wait. A kid?

The person looked up, seeming to remember that Bucky was there. Already alarms were starting to blare, signaling that a prisoner had been released. "Okay, that's not good. Um—Sargent Barnes, right? We're here to rescue you!"

He almost asked, *how do I know you're telling the truth?* But then he realized how stupid that was, that if he stayed there he'd be captured again, and so he stepped out of the cell and found himself looking at four guards sprawled out across the ground. Beside them stood someone he recognized, decked out in a HYDRA uniform sans helmet.

"You found him," said the person he knew as Black Widow. "Great, let's get out of here."

Behind him, the other person reached up and removed his helmet. Bucky's pulse jumped as he recognized Tony Stark's kid. If he was here, his mentor couldn't be far behind—and the last time they'd met in as hectic a situation as this, it hadn't ended particularly well. And on top of that, he was ninety percent sure that the kid had been the one to sell him out to HYDRA. Under the

influence of the Venom Project, so it wasn't his fault, but still.

"Before they send reinforcements would be nice!" Natasha called. She was already holding a handgun, moving for the door to the prison block with deadly efficiency. She was just as fierce as Bucky remembered her.

Peter dropped his helmet and ripped the gloves off of the HYDRA uniform, baring these strange contraptions on his wrists in preparation for combat. "On it! Oh, Sargent Barnes, are you okay to fight? You look a little beat up!"

He rubbed self-consciously at his battered arm. "I've seen worse. Is Steve waiting on the outside?"

"On the inside, if all went according to plan." Natasha led them into a sharp right down a small corridor, and Bucky was immediately lost. He'd never seen the inside of the base before, not other than his tiny cell. "He should be fighting his way toward us with Wanda and Clint. They'll find us and we'll fight our way out together."

"And...Stark?"

"Back in New York."

Bucky frowned, shooting a glance at Peter. "Really?"

"Really," Natasha said. She led them down another corridor to the right, then to the left, then up a narrow flight of stairs. She pressed at her earpiece and said, "Steve, we've got Bucky. He's safe."

"Safe being a relative term," Peter joked, looking over his shoulder to make sure there weren't any agents on their tail. "We're still in the middle of a base full of HYDRA agents."

And they said something about luring the Avengers here to use a new weapon on them, Bucky recalled. Steve might have caught these guys off guard with this attack, but if they get their feet beneath them and use whatever that weapon is...

"We're not safe," Bucky said sharply. "I heard one of the men say something about a new weapon, along the lines of the Venom Project. We need to get out *now*."

Peter tensed. "If anything like Venom is around here, we can't stay."

"Exactly."

They came upon a locked door, and Peter beat it down with a few sharp blows.

"Isn't that solid steel?" Bucky asked, perturbed.

"Huh? Oh, I guess it is. On your right!"

Natasha flipped to one side as gunfire ripped down the corridor, missing them by a millimeter. The three of them were behind cover in an instant. "That would be the backup we were worried about! Peter, got a web grenade?"

"Right, right! Karen, do the web grenade thing!"

Bucky watched as Peter shot out from under cover, quick as a bullet, and chucked something at the agents down the hall. The thing exploded into a mess of webbing, and the gunfire stopped.

They moved on. Bucky was certain there were more agents coming, but they needed to keep

moving for as long as they could. Already his legs were burning, and his lungs felt tight. He'd gone too long without food and water to be running so much, but he wouldn't say anything. Steve was counting on him to make it out.

Peter's head jerked up. "Left! Five agents!"

Natasha fired five times in that direction before Bucky could even blink, and the men went down.

"Right! Two more!"

Two more shots, and it was over.

Natasha holstered her gun as she approached the net door, using both hands to pry it open. "Sense anything else, Peter?"

The kid shook his head, eyes wide, chest moving quick and shallow. "I think we're moving deeper. Are you sure this is the right way?"

Natasha shook her head. "I'm not sure of anything. I—"

The entire compound shook violently, dust falling from the ceiling. Bucky had to grip the wall to keep himself from going over.

"What the hell was that?" Peter gasped. "Oh, no—don't tell Mr. Stark that I said—!"

"An explosion," Natasha said, cutting him off. She righted herself and shook dust out of her hair. "Something's gone wrong."

The weapon. Whatever it is, they're starting it up.

As if on cue, the entire base shook again. More explosions from somewhere below them. Bucky's mind flicked to Steve, and he hoped that he wasn't at the center of those explosions.

"We have to get out *now*, before the blasts bring the entire base down on our heads!" Natasha started moving again, pushing her way through the next door.

"Wait, don't—!"

Peter moved, but Bucky was closer. Weak as he was, he raised his arm to catch the gunfire from the single HYDRA agent before it could strike Natasha in the chest. By that time Peter had already webbed the guy's eyes shut, and Bucky delivered him a solid punch to the chest that put him down. He felt a little nauseous from the exertion, but it was fine. They'd make it out soon.

Natasha finished pushing the door open. "Thanks, guys. I owe you." But her hands were shaking a little, and Bucky knew she was more stunned than she appeared. "I think we're starting to move toward the surface."

And apparently they were, because as they spiraled closer and closer, taking out any agent they came across, they found exactly the person Bucky had been hoping to see.

"Bucky!"

Steve was splattered with what looked like blood, had a nasty bruise blossoming over one cheekbone, but he seemed mostly unharmed. The smile that broke out across his face when he saw Bucky was unparalleled.

"You made it!" he exclaimed, nearing Bucky as his friends held off the agents behind him. He hooked one arm around his shoulders and drew him in for a short but fierce hug. "Jesus, Buck, you gotta stop doing this to me."

Gunfire rang out behind them, and Steve whipped around to catch it with his shield. A moment later there was this great wave of scarlet tearing through the tunnel, and the gunmen screamed and went down.

"Move for the surface!" called the source of the scarlet. Wanda, if Bucky was remembering correctly. "Those explosions are coming from deep underground; we'll be pulled down if we don't get out!"

Steve gave a sharp nod. "Bucky, are you hurt?"

"I'll live," he said. "Let's get out of here." Because the dust in the air was thick, and breathing was already a bit difficult, and he couldn't stand being underground a moment longer. He took Steve's arm when he offered it, and then they were back to weaving through the corridors.

"Almost out!" Steve said as they wound higher and higher. "We just need—!"

But that, of course, was when it all went wrong.

Bucky saw the cracks appear a moment before Steve did. He even tried to push his friend to safety, not wanting them both to go down. But it didn't work, because that was just his luck, and the next moment the ground was splintering beneath their feet as another set of explosions rang out.

"Grab them!"

He thought he caught a hint of scarlet, reaching for his hand, but by the time it got within a foot of him it was too late. The ground fell out, the tunnels collapsed, and Bucky was thrown into darkness.

Steve awoke to a crushing blackness.

The darkness was so complete that for a moment he thought he was still unconscious. But then he blinked a few times and swallowed around a dry throat and a swollen tongue, and he knew that he was awake. The world around him was just so very black that he couldn't see a thing.

Blurily, he tried to remember what had happened before he'd been knocked out. He remembered storming the base to save Bucky, fighting his way through hoards of HYDRA agents in the corridors, finding his partner bruised and burned but *alive*...and then nothing. There had been the sound of cracking cement, a sharp feeling in his stomach like he was falling, and then his world had gone completely black.

Those explosions, he thought. They'd started going off after he'd reached the base. He didn't know what had triggered them, if they were meant to kill the Avengers or just bring the base down on their heads, but it had gone right for HYDRA. The ground had given out, and he'd fallen.

At least I'm alive, he thought. *And Bucky...*

He froze. *Bucky!* Had he fallen too? Was he here, trapped in the darkness?"

"Buck?" he whispered, and his voice felt like it traveled for miles. "C'mon, tell me you made it out..."

There was no response. But of course, Bucky could have just been unconscious. Steve made to get to his feet, and—

Oh, god. Pain blossomed from his side. When he felt along the skin there, he found it puffy and hot to the touch, but dry. He had a broken rib, maybe even two or three. And when he moved to get to his feet, he felt even more than that. There was something wet trickling down his neck from a hit to the head (he had no idea how hard, as he couldn't see to tell if the world was spinning), and his shoulder felt very, very dislocated.

He took a deep breath. *Okay, Rogers, calm down. You've been in this position a dozen times. All you have to do is breathe and relax.*

Slowly, painfully, he stretched his arm out to one side like he'd been taught in his army days. Then he moved the arm so it was curved around the back of his head, braced himself, and reached for the opposite shoulder.

He hissed as the shoulder popped back into place, the sharp pain turning into more of a dull burn. He wouldn't be able to use it properly for a while, but it wasn't going to kill him. His other injuries, however...

Steve tried to sit up and winced as his head started to pound. Oh yeah, he was in concussion territory. He must have fallen very far very fast for this to happen, and hit some things on the way down. That didn't make him feel any better about Bucky being down there with him.

Gotta find some way to make light. He shifted, and this time he actually managed to sit up. He suspected that his shin might have been fractured by the way it throbbed as he tried to get his feet beneath him, but it wasn't broken so he decided he had more important things to worry about. Like *light*.

When he waved his hands in front of him, there was nothing there. So he took a few tentative steps forward, arms still out to catch him, until he came into contact with what felt like a wall. He didn't mean to shift it, he really didn't—he knew how stupid it was to go around messing with the room's supports. It could cause another collapse, and the next one could kill him. But when he touched that wall, it was less of a wall and more of a cracked sheet of drywall that crumbled beneath his touch. And then, miraculously, there was light.

He blinked hard as the light trickled into the room, just bright enough to illuminate his surroundings.

Then his eyes went wide. "Bucky!"

His childhood friend was there, lying curled on his side a few feet away. No one else was there except for one unlucky HYDRA agent who had fallen and snapped his neck. Steve stepped over him as he went for Bucky, dropping to his knees at his sides. A few fingers pressed to his neck told him that he was still alive.

"Bucky?" Steve shook him a little. "Come back to me, Buck. Come on..."

Bucky shifted a little, but didn't open his eyes.

"Oh, no..." Steve put one hand on his friend's shoulder, rolling him onto his back and checking for injuries. The rest of his metal arm was in tatters, but other than that he seemed devoid of any major injuries. Rather, he was covered in a flurry of cuts and bruises that spoke of a week's time in captivity. There was a lump on the back of his head, and the fall had definitely caused a few larger cuts to open up on his back, but he seemed mostly fine.

Bucky's expression twisted. "Steve?" he muttered. "Is...is that you?"

He could have collapsed in relief. Or, maybe that was just the concussion. "I'm here. We fell, but we're going to figure this out."

Bucky groaned, eyelids fluttering. He tried to reach up with one arm and stopped as the motion undoubtedly caused him a fair amount of pain. "D-damn...what happened...?"

Steve did his best to smile and reassure him, even as his head spun and his stomach lurched. *Not good*. "We fell," he repeated. "I think those explosions took out the supports in the lower levels, and we fell right through to the bottom."

"Oh..." Bucky blinked at the ceiling. "Everything hurts."

"I know." Steve followed Bucky's gaze, hoping to see some kind of gap in the ceiling they could squeeze through. But now that he could see, he was disheartened to realize that the ceiling was entirely packed with rock. There was no way up. But if light was coming in from somewhere, that meant there was a way to the surface. They just had to find it and get out.

Bucky started to inch his way into a sitting position, and Steve reached out to steady him despite feeling pretty unsteady himself. "Ow," he complained drily. "How far did we fall?"

"Don't know." Again Steve tried to look around them for a way out. But all around them was rubble, the only open path leading in the direction of the light. If they were lucky, that path would take them right to the surface. If they *weren't* lucky...

"Well, shit." Bucky slumped against his injured shoulder, and Steve had to grit his teeth to hide the pain. "Hey, at least we're together again."

He laughed tightly. "Yeah. Together and trapped, potentially miles below ground."

"Woah, hey—are you okay?"

Steve winced again. His voice must have given away just how much pain he was in. "I-I'm fine, Buck. Calm down and worry about yourself. You've been with HYDRA for a week; are you sure there aren't any grievous injuries you're hiding from me?"

"Think I cut my back in the fall," he said, twisting a little to look. "But HYDRA...they did mediocre at best. I don't think they had the tech to program me."

It was a relief, but right now Steve was more focused on those slashes. When Bucky turned he could see them, two gouges where rocks had cut him in the fall. They weren't deadly, but they could be if they weren't bandaged. "Here, lay on your stomach. I'm going to do what I can to clean and bandage those."

"What about you? Don't try to hide it from me, I know you too well for that."

"I'm fine," he repeated, though he most certainly wasn't. "Just a few scratches and a bump on the head. Let me patch you up first."

"Okay, but you're next."

"Deal." Steve helped Bucky roll onto his stomach, then pulled up the remains of his shirt. He winced. "They're not too deep, but I'll bandage them anyway. Hang on..." He got to his feet and went to the dead HYDRA agent, stripping off his uniform and tearing it into strips. Then he went back to Bucky and used them the best he could. It wasn't a perfect fix, but it would hold for the time being. It might even hold until they made it out or were rescued. Steve checked out the bump on the back of Bucky's head (painful but nonlethal) and ran his eyes down the rest of his scrapes and bruises (recoverable but painful), but he seemed okay. He'd been lucky.

"They didn't want to kill me," Bucky explained, still a bit groggy. "And I'm pretty sure they didn't want to hurt me too bad, just in case they killed me before they could use me against you. I guess it worked out in my favor."

"Guess it did," Steve agreed, sitting back and letting Bucky pull his shirt back down. His head spun with the movement.

Unfortunately Bucky was observant enough to catch his discomfort. "Hey now, don't pass out on me! Come on, let me get a look at you." Bucky held out an arm, and Steve took it. He didn't feel too good, and leaning on his friend felt incredible. He wanted to lie back down.

"Easy, easy..." Bucky lowered him to the ground and started checking him over. He hissed through his teeth sympathetically when he reached Steve's shoulder, and cringed again when he came across his broken ribs. "Damn, Steve, this doesn't look good. I can't do much; you'll need real medical attention."

"I'll get it once we reach the surface," Steve murmured. He was beginning to feel sleepy.

"No—don't fall asleep!" Bucky felt around the back of his head and said, "You definitely have a concussion. You're bleeding, but it feels like it's on its way out. You'll live but just *don't go to sleep*."

He jolted. "Right, right. No sleeping."

"I mean it, Steve!"

"I know!" He huffed as Bucky got him back into a sitting position. "We need to get moving, see if there's a way out."

"Or," Bucky said, "we could stay here. Your team will be looking for us, and everyone knows that the best way to be found is to stay put."

Steve shook his head, which only made it spin harder. "We could be miles beneath the surface, buried under a few tons of rubble. We have no idea how long it might take for the team to dig us out of here. By the time that happens we could die of dehydration or starvation, and by the look of you you're already halfway there."

Bucky looked away sharply, and Steve knew he was right. "I'll be fine. It's safer for you to wait with those injuries."

"And it's safer for you to leave with yours." Steve regarded him stubbornly. "We go."

"What if we run into trouble?" Bucky demanded. "That concussion is going to keep you weak as a newborn kitten, Rogers, you know I'm right. And I'm not in much of a position to fight either, not with my arm out of commission."

Steve reached immediately for the pocket in his uniform. "Speaking of which..." He pulled out the chunk of Bucky's prosthetic that had been left in that first cell. "I think this is yours."

Bucky stared for a moment, uncomprehending. But then he took the thing and laughed, holding it where it would have fit on his metal arm. "I appreciate the sentiment, but it's not possible to reattach it at the moment." He held it back out. "Keep it safe for me?"

Steve smiled back, taking the metal and tucking it back into the breast pocket of his uniform. "Of course."

Bucky helped get him leaning against the wall. "Now all we can do is wait."

"Nope. All we can do is get moving. There's daylight right there, Buck, there's a way up!"

"Steve—"

"We can make it. I'm strong, you know, not like that scrawny kid you knew back in Brooklyn a hundred years ago!"

Bucky took a moment to stare at the ground, like he knew the decision he had to make but wasn't ready to admit it. "It really has been about that long, hasn't it?"

"Something like that." Steve leaned back off the wall and struggled to his feet. Bucky was at his side the whole way, gripping his arm to keep him from falling, and soon enough he was standing again. "Now come on, let's check out that daylight."

Steve swayed a bit as he got used to standing again, but soon enough the pain dulled to a manageable level. As an afterthought he rummaged through the dead guard's pockets, and came up with a flashlight.

"Lucky break," Bucky said, taking the light and clipping it to his belt. "Let's hope we won't need it."

"Yeah." Steve stepped toward the other side of the chamber, where the light was coming from. "Let's hope."

But the hope turned out to be useless. All they saw on the other side was a thin trickle of light coming in from the ceiling. There was no way to get through without potentially bringing the whole place down on them, and that light still could have been filtering in from miles above. There wasn't a way out from there.

"Look," Bucky said, pointing to a darker corner of the chamber. "I'm pretty sure that's a tunnel."

"A part of the base?"

Bucky shone his light at the corner. Sure enough, a narrow corridor wove away into the darkness. "Maybe, but this looks too deep to be a part of the normal base. My best guess is that we're in some kind of system of tunnels kept beneath it."

Steve's expression darkened and he said, "Which means that anything could be down here with us."

Bucky gave a grim nod. "Anything. And I definitely heard talk of some kind of weapon being kept in this place for the express purpose of killing us all."

"Well..." Steve shifted. There was something like fear bubbling in his stomach, and he didn't like it. "I guess the only way out is forward."

"We'll know soon enough." Bucky approached, light pointed forward. "Let's get moving."

"What do you mean, collapse? How could the entire base just go down like that?"

Natasha shook her head helplessly. "Some kind of explosive charge was set off in the lower levels, and it caused the floors to go out. Steve and Bucky were standing in the wrong place at the wrong time, and we didn't manage to catch them before we had to flee ourselves."

"So what, he's just down there? The two of them are trapped somewhere below ground?"

"If they're still alive," Natasha confirmed. Behind her, Peter made a sound like he'd been hit. "It's entirely likely that they are, in which case they'll need help quickly. I already have Wanda working to excavate the rubble, but it's not going to be easy. The slightest shift could cause the pocket they're in to close and crush them both."

Tony—or, the *hologram* of Tony—pinched at the bridge of his nose miserably. *"Great. Just great."*

"We're doing what we can to get them out. And we have no idea how deep they're buried, so they could be discovered at any time."

"Or they could be crushed, like you said." Tony shook his head miserably. *"Okay. Okay, I can have a squad of guys out there to help within the day, and the rest of the team will be there even sooner. You could use our help."*

"We could," Natasha said. "We'll keep working until you get here, and maybe we'll even find them. But either way, you should hurry. I'm not sure how long we have, if either of them were severely injured in the fall. We're running on borrowed time."

"I know. Believe me." Tony's head dipped a bit, like he was seeing that dark future where Steve never emerged, and his fingers curled into fists. *"I'll be there in a few hours."*

The call ended, and the team went back to digging.

Chapter End Notes

(I want to say this here because I didn't feel like it fit at the top, so holy shit you guys. Ant-Man and the Wasp. Post credits scene. Go watch it.)

Exploration

Chapter Notes

Well by the time this goes up I'll be in Los Angeles! I'm definitely looking forward to a break from all the bullshit, but not from this story! If all goes according to plan I should keep having chapters up without pause.

With that being said, enjoy the next chapter!

The tunnels, narrow as they were, didn't turn into a dead end. So Steve and Bucky made their way further into the ruins, keeping the light on so they didn't miss anything. Before long it became very clear that they were well below the normal base, in an underground web of tunnels that really could stretch for miles. And strangely, those tunnels seemed to serve no purpose. There were larger rooms filled with nothing but jagged rocks and empty tables. There were corridors lined with rubble. But other than that, nothing.

It was like they were walking around in a maze with nothing to mark their progress.

"We're getting nowhere," Bucky said after what felt like their third hour of walking. "Every time we see daylight, there's no way to get to the surface. How do we know this place even spits out at the surface?"

Steve just shook his head. "We don't."

"Great." Bucky shone the light down the passageway, then took a sharp left. Their plan was to hug the left wall until they either reached the surface or were dug out by the Avengers. Or a third option that Steve didn't even want to think about.

"This place seems endless," Steve said as they started off down the new corridor. This one was a little larger than the others, so he drew up beside Bucky instead of following close behind. He had to walk at a bit of an angle, which made his ribs pretty much hate him, but it was worth it. "Like a maze."

Bucky hummed. "I wonder what they're hiding."

"Hiding...?"

"Of course. I know how HYDRA thinks, and they wouldn't have built this maze if it wasn't hiding something at its core. There's something here, maybe even that weapon I told you about."

It was probably the least comforting thing Steve had heard in a while, and he'd heard a lot of discomfoting things in the past twenty-four hours. "And if they're trying to guard something, they might have actual guards."

"Real perceptive, Steve."

He moved to elbow him, a smile on his face, but he had to stop as the motion tugged at his broken ribs. He winced.

"Ribs?" Bucky guessed, sounding concerned. Then, when Steve nodded, "We can't afford to stay down here for much longer if you're getting worse."

"Not much we can do about it." Steve swiped the back of his wrist across his forehead. He'd stripped off his cowl a few hours back, but he still felt suffocated by the freezing, damp air. "And don't downplay your own injuries, Buck. I know you're hurt too."

"Yeah, but not as badly as you." But Steve could still see the pain on his face whenever he twisted wrong, the skin tugging around the cuts on his back. And that wasn't even including the bruises and cuts and burns covering the rest of his body, or the fact that he was pretty sure Bucky hadn't eaten in days.

Steve turned his attention back on the corridor, keeping himself steady even as his head started up a new bout of throbbing. Now wasn't the time to keep arguing about injuries, or how long they had before one of them died. So instead he said, "I'm just glad you're alive." And it was true. After Bucky had gone to Wakanda to have his programming removed, he hadn't been sure how long it would be before he'd see him again—or even *if* he would see him.

Bucky shot him a sideways glance. "And I'm glad you're alive. Risky business for a while there, wasn't it? I heard HYDRA was trying to infect all of you with Experiment 0600Y."

"We took care of that," Steve said simply. "No one died except for Venom and Roland."

"So that son of a bitch was finally put in his place, was he? I'm glad."

Steve looked away. "So were we. It's just—look, when I heard you were trapped in this place, my heart stopped."

"I..." Bucky trailed off, like he wasn't quite sure what to say. "I'm sorry. I know I should have told you when I left Wakanda to go undercover, but I didn't want you to worry or get involved. I thought you'd be safer in New York."

"You'd *also* be safer in New York," he pointed out. "You should have told me what you were doing. I'm—I'm your *partner*, Buck, you *know* that. I deserve to know when you're risking your life."

Now it was Bucky's turn to look away, expression twisted into one of guilt. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I didn't want to put your life at risk."

"That's not your choice!" Then he winced, the outburst straining his lungs, which strained his side, which made everything hurt miserably. "I get to decide when I put my life at risk, all right? And I've decided that you're worth that risk."

"I'm touched," Bucky said in a failed attempt to sound nonchalant. "But this was my mission. I *needed* to do this, Steve, can't you understand that? I needed to make up for it all."

Steve stopped. "You don't have anything to make up for."

"Tell that to the people I killed." Bucky shone the light down another corridor, then made the turn. "Come on, keep moving."

"No." Steve kept his feet planted firmly. "We're not taking another step until you realize that this was *never* your fault. I shouldn't have assumed you were dead after you fell, I should have understood that you were—!"

Bucky turned back. "That I was *what*, dragged out of the water and turned into a super soldier? No, Steve, you shouldn't have understood that. It was all on me."

"No, it *wasn't*. You couldn't control the things you were forced to do, okay? The *real* you is a better man than anyone else I've ever met. You've saved my life more times than I can count. You even saved Peter!"

"Yeah, and then he turned around and ratted me out to Roland."

"That...wasn't his fault either. He was being controlled, and the thing doing the controlling picked you out of his head."

"I know about Venom. You don't have to explain it."

Steve shifted uncomfortably and said, "Then you should see the parallels. We don't blame Peter for what he did while he was under that thing's control, and we don't blame you for what you did while you were under HYDRA's control."

"Tell that to Stark."

"Okay, fine—I don't blame you."

Bucky just shook his head. "If I go back, I'll start another war. Stark isn't just going to step aside and let me return to the compound."

"Maybe not." Steve couldn't exactly imagine it himself. "But that's not something we have time to worry about right now. Admit you're not to blame for any of this, and we'll keep moving."

"You're impossible."

"Say it, Buck."

Bucky rolled his eyes, but he seemed more joking than serious. "Fine. I don't blame myself. Are you happy now?"

Steve wasn't an idiot; he knew that Bucky didn't really believe it. But this was something they'd have to work on for a long time to get right, he *knew* that, so he considered this a good start. "Yeah, actually, I am. Now let's move."

That was when it started.

Steve staggered as the ground shook beneath his feet, the walls rolling with the force of the vibrations. *More explosions? But where are they coming from?*

Bucky gripped the wall to keep from falling over. "Well *that* doesn't feel good. Any more of those and we'll be crushed."

"It could be from the team trying to dig us out," Steve said, but he wasn't optimistic. "Maybe they shifted something."

As if on cue, the walls shook again. But this time, from somewhere deep in the maze, there was the unmistakable sound of a *roar*.

"Or maybe," Bucky said, suddenly tense, "there's something down here with us."

"The thing HYDRA was trying to hide?"

Bucky nodded. "I told you that while I was in that cell I heard one of the agents say something about having a new weapon. Maybe this is it, hidden as they tried to put the final touches on it."

"Well we'd better hope it's nothing like the last project to come out of HYDRA, otherwise we don't stand a chance."

Bucky cringed. "We need to keep moving. All we can do is be careful and hope we don't run into that thing."

It wasn't much of a plan. But as that roar sounded again, distant and vicious and powerful, Steve knew that they had no other choice.

Bucky soon came to realize that Steve was just as stubborn as always, the instant he refused to sit down and rest.

"We've been traveling for hours," he protested for the tenth time that hour. "It has to be nighttime by now, and we need to sit down unless you want your injuries to get worse."

"If we stay still, there's a higher chance that the thing making that roaring sound will find us. I lost my shield in the fall, and you don't appear to have a gun, which means that all we have are our fists. That won't be enough to take down a monster."

"Steve, we need rest." Bucky had *eyes*, so he knew how much pain his friend was in. He saw it every time he took a breath, or had to turn a corner, or had to take a step. His shoulder and his ribs and his head were hurting him immensely. "If we keep going, you're going to kill yourself."

"How long has it been since you've eaten, or had anything to drink? You're on borrowed time, Buck, and I'm not letting you die."

"I'm on borrowed time?" Because yeah, sure, he felt like crap. But Steve was literally swaying, so he thought he was the higher priority. "Okay, we're done."

"No we're—!"

Bucky put a hand on his chest, forcing him to stop. "Sit down. We're resting."

"Hey—!"

But again, Bucky cut him off. "*Down*, Rogers. You need to stop."

Steve looked like he was going to protest for a moment. But then he got a good look at Bucky's face, and he seemed to realize how serious he was. "Fine," he said, and he'd never sounded so exhausted. Maybe his injuries were even worse than he'd feared. "Maybe just for a few minutes."

That was when Steve crumpled like a ragdoll.

"Steve!" Bucky tried too late to catch him, barely managing to keep his head from striking the ground along with the rest of his body. "You idiot, you didn't tell me it was this bad! Is it the concussion?"

Steve blinked blearily at the ceiling. "No, no...I'm fine. Just...give me a minute, okay?"

"I'm going to give you a whole lot of minutes," Bucky said, putting the light down in favor of checking the back of his friend's head. The wound there was oozing blood, and the entire area was still swollen and hot to the touch.

Not good.

Bucky let Steve's head rest in his lap as he checked his shoulder, which had been jostled but not dislocated by the fall, and his side, which was just a little more purple than it had been a few hours prior. He was aware of the slices in his own back, throbbing and leaking blood from the sudden movement, but he was more worried about Steve. Sure, dehydration was making his head spin and everything had been progressively getting fuzzier over the hours, but he wasn't the priority.

"We're in trouble," Steve muttered, the barest slur to his words. "We...we won't make it out like this, Buck, we're in so much trouble..."

"No we're not, we're going to be fine." Bucky put an arm over Steve's chest, boxing him in. "Let's rest for a minute, then we can keep going. You need medical attention *now*."

"I thought you wanted to stay put?" Steve laughed shakily.

"Yeah, well it looks like your friends aren't coming. We have to get out."

Steve smiled and raised his hand at nothing. "Right, right...get out..."

"Hey." Bucky tapped at his cheeks. "No falling asleep, okay? No closing your eyes. We're just going to sit here and breathe for a minute."

Steve just kept smiling. "You're a good friend, Buck. You know that?"

"You're delirious. Stop talking."

"Not...*that* delirious just yet."

Bucky groaned. Then he tensed as that same sound from before returned, sounding a lot closer than it had before. Either the creature was moving, or they'd walked closer to it. And of course, they still had no idea just what the hell it was.

Even Steve seemed to tense slightly at the sound. "Not a good sign," he rasped.

"No," Bucky agreed. He reached for the light and turned it off, and the two were cast into darkness. "Just in case it has good eyes," he explained. "Though with the darkness down here, I think it's more likely that it has great *hearing*."

"Then we should shut up," Steve said helpfully.

"Yeah." Bucky stared uneasily into the darkness. He wasn't sure what to do. Steve was seriously injured, but staying put was no longer an option. Steve had been right when he'd said that the monster would find them quicker if they were just sitting in one place. And seeing as they could be buried miles down, being found was becoming increasingly unlikely. If they wanted to live, they had to move—but moving could kill Steve faster. And on top of that, Bucky himself wasn't doing too hot. If they ran into that monster on the path to the surface...

The roar sounded again, and the tunnel shook.

They stayed there for what could have either been minutes or hours. But eventually the roar grew

too close for comfort, and Bucky had to get Steve back on his feet. He sounded like he was doing a little better. His voice was clearer.

"Come on," Bucky said softly. "We should get moving and keep our voices down. If that thing is tracking us based on sound, we need to throw it off."

Steve blinked, trying to get his head back on straight. "What if it's tracking us based on smell?"

"Then we're fucked."

"Hey!" Steve batted at him with one rubbery arm. "Language!"

"Right, sorry." Bucky flicked the light back on long enough to get the lay of the land, then shut it off. It would be safer to travel in darkness for as long as they could.

Then they were moving.

The next few hours passed in silence, with only the occasional whisper about direction. He kept Steve's hand in his to make sure he didn't collapse again, leading them along the leftmost passages in a bid for freedom. The deeper they got, the more Bucky began to grow suspicious that they hadn't heard the monster growl in a while.

A gust of warm air blew through the passageway, and Bucky froze. The air was suddenly wet and awful-smelling.

He put a hand on Steve's chest to stop him.

Steve stopped. "What is it?" he whispered, like he hadn't felt the air temperature change.

Bucky shook his head, then realized that Steve couldn't see him. They'd had the light off for the past few minutes, both to conserve battery and to make sure the monster didn't see them, so the passageway was pitch black.

"Something's wrong," Bucky said in a low tone. "I think—"

Another gust of air rolled down the corridor, and this time Bucky *heard* it. He heard the breathing.

His blood ran cold. "Steve," he whispered, "go back. *Now.*"

"What?"

"It's *here*, Steve, the monster is here, I need you to move *now!*"

Unfortunately his voice hitched on the last word, growing just a little too loud, and the monster—whatever it looked like, however large it was—heard them loud and clear.

It *roared*.

"Go *now!*"

Bucky fumbled with the flashlight as Steve took off in the other direction, reaching for the switch because they needed to see if they were going to escape whatever that thing was. He ran as fast as he could in complete darkness, looking for the switch on the side of the flashlight, until—

The chamber flooded with light, and Bucky choked on a gasp.

The monster roared at them, this huge, disgusting thing with six legs and eight eyes and claws the size of Bucky's whole hand. Its skin was white and shiny and shot through with scarlet veins, its eyes cloudy from what could have been years underground, and as it opened its mouth Bucky was stricken by its pure *size*. The tunnels had opened up around them in the past half hour, and now they were large enough to support the hulking creature.

"Back into the smaller tunnels! It won't be able to fit!"

Steve was already running before the words even left his mouth. He was slower than he normally was, his injuries slowing him down, but adrenaline pushed him hard toward safety. Bucky wasn't far behind.

Behind them, the monster roared and sprung forward. He knew that this thing *had* to be the new weapon HYDRA was developing, as it snarled and spat this disgusting white froth and crashed after them as fast as it could. Its six legs moved unnaturally, the bones sliding beneath its thin skin as it climbed the walls and leapt in an attempt to intercept them.

Bucky cried out as one of the creature's claws caught his ankle, bringing him down.

"*Bucky!*"

Steve was already in the process of turning to help, and he couldn't let that happen. So he rolled over and punched with all his strength, his metal arm creaking under the strain, and the creature recoiled long enough for him to yank himself free and *run*.

"Buck, your ankle—!"

He shoved Steve to get him moving, and they tore for the smaller tunnels. He could feel something wet and thick dripping down his heel and squishing in his boot, and he knew he was hurt. But he could still run, and so that was what he did.

Behind them, the monster was getting to its feet. It whipped its head around like it couldn't see them, as Bucky had suspected, but it locked on to their footsteps without trouble. It jumped again.

Steve yanked Bucky out of the way a heartbeat before one of the thing's legs could smash into him. But he was swaying, probably as a result of his concussion, and Bucky had to support him so he didn't fall over.

"Go, go, *go!*"

Bucky shoved Steve ahead of him and turned as the monster approached. If they stood a chance, they'd need a head start—and so he dodged to one side as the thing swung at him again, landing on its foot and using it as leverage to leap up and punch it across the jaw. It staggered, and Bucky smashed into its elbow as he landed. Then he was pushing himself up and sprinting after Steve, breaking for the smaller tunnels.

The walls began to close in as they made it further back. But the creature was snarling, staggering after them as it recovered from the blow Bucky had dealt it, and it was closing in fast.

Ahead of them, Bucky's light shone on a doorway. Beyond it, the tunnel would be far too small for the creature to fit. He kept close on Steve's heels as they approached, barely keeping ahead of the monster—but of course, at the worst possible moment, Steve hit the ground wrong and fell.

"Steve—!"

Bucky skittered to a halt, turning to make sure his friend didn't end up as monster food. He sprang to defend the downed man as the monster went for him, razor-like fangs slicing into his metal arm as he went to deliver another punch. The thing shook him by the prosthetic, and his head spun. But that wasn't the worst of it. A moment later, as Steve struggled to his feet, the monster bit down *hard* and completely severed the rest of the arm from his body.

Then Steve was there. He threw a punch, be it weaker than normal, and the creature wailed in pain. Steve's arms threaded beneath Bucky's shoulders, pulled as hard as he could, and then the two were falling back through the doorway and retreating into the smaller of the tunnels.

"Don't look back!" Steve gasped, half-dragging Bucky as he struggled to get his feet beneath him. "We're okay, it can't get us!"

As if to prove their point, the monster rammed itself against the doorway and failed to get in. It shrieked a disturbingly human wail, writhing as it tried to shove itself through the doorway, but it was a futile effort. Eventually it drew back, roared one last time, and vanished back into the darkness.

"It'll be back," Bucky said, breathless. "We have to stick to the small tunnels from here on out."

"We have to bandage you up, is what we have to do! Jesus, Buck, your ankle is gushing blood!"

He blinked down at it, the flashlight barely illuminating the bloody gash in his ankle. Not deadly, but not good. His head spun just thinking about all the blood he'd lost already.

"Here, stay down." Steve leaned him against the wall and yanked his shoe and sock off, rolling up his pant leg to get a good look at the wound. "I can bandage it like I did the cuts on your back, but it won't last. We need to find a way out."

Bucky hissed in pain as Steve bound the wound with trembling hands, replacing his sock and his boot a moment later. If they ran into that thing again, he wasn't sure he'd be able to fight.

"I guess that's the weapon," Steve said, voice shaking. He sat back against the wall and trembled. "T-that was..."

He winced. "Terrifying."

"...Yeah. That was terrifying."

"How the hell are we supposed to navigate this place if that thing is running around? What if the only way out takes us through another wide-open room like that? It'll kill us!"

"We'll just have to be careful," Bucky said, even though the prospect of going back into an open room was making his stomach lurch. "We'll stick to the smaller tunnels as much as we can, and we'll use the light whenever we have to go into larger systems. We'll make it work."

"I-I..." Steve trailed off, looking more alarmed than Bucky had seen him in a long time. Then he took a deep breath, seeming to ground himself, and said, "Okay. We—we'll do this together, Buck, we'll be okay. We'll keep each other safe."

Bucky nodded. "Until the end of the line, right?"

"Yeah." He laughed breathlessly. "Until the end of the line."

The two leaned against each other and shook.

"Mr. Stark, we've got something!"

Tony whipped around at the sound of Peter's voice, the kid slinging himself out of the pit they'd been digging in the rubble. There was something in his hands, but Tony couldn't see it clearly.

"What is it?" he asked, landing and disengaging from the suit. "What'd you find?"

Peter stopped in front of him and held out the thing in his hands, and Tony's heart nearly stopped.

It was Steve's shield.

Tony sucked in a sharp breath as he held the shield, a good portion of the paint having been scratched right off the vibranium. "Is this all you found?" he whispered.

Peter nodded. "No body yet, Mr. Stark. We're still searching."

"Then search harder!" he snapped. "Steve is down there without his shield, and he could be badly hurt. I refuse to believe he's dead, so *find* him!"

Peter flinched. "S-sorry, Mr. Stark, we're *trying*..."

He was immediately hit with a wave of guilt. "Hey, no—I'm sorry, kid, that wasn't right. Just... we'll keep searching together, how about that?"

Peter gave an anxious nod. "We'll...um, we'll find him, Mr. Stark. You know that, right?"

He sighed and reached out, putting a hand on the kid's shoulders. "Yeah. I know, Pete."

He fired his thrusters, rose into the air, and prepared to keep digging.

What the Soul Wants

Chapter Notes

Hopefully when THIS goes up I'll still be on vacation, but that doesn't mean I don't want to hear from you guys! Your comments really brighten up my day.

Enjoy!

Steve came to what could have been hours later, realizing with a shock of cold horror that he wasn't supposed to sleep. But he hadn't been able to help it after their scuffle with the monster, and Bucky had already passed out, so he'd slipped off before he could stop himself.

I won't be able to risk that again, he realized, pressing a hand to the back of his head. It was slightly less swollen now, but he knew the concussion was still going strong. He had to be careful about what happened next. He was so light-headed, and his body hurt so much already...

Steve shot a glance at Bucky, who was still sleeping with his head resting against his shoulder. He was worried about him. The wound on his ankle was bad, and he'd already been malnourished and dehydrated before falling down into the tunnels, and he wasn't entirely convinced that HYDRA hadn't done some real damage to him. And now they were *here*, cold and injured and lost in the dark with some kind of monster chasing after them. They didn't even have their weapons.

But he couldn't let himself dwell on that. They had to get up and keep moving if they wanted to get out.

Steve took hold of Bucky's shoulder, shaking him lightly. "Buck," he whispered, "wake up. It's time to get going."

Bucky shifted, paused, and opened his eyes. He looked a little bleary, which Steve hoped was from his nap rather than the amount of blood he'd lost. "Steve?"

"Yeah, it's me. Come on, get up."

Bucky blinked, becoming more lucid by the moment. "You're okay?" he asked, sitting up. "But—your head! Did you fall asleep?"

"I'm fine," he said quickly. "Let's focus on getting out of here."

Bucky looked away, and Steve could practically sense his hopelessness.

"We *will* get out," he reassured him. "You have to trust me on this. We'll get out."

He raised the remnants of his prosthesis in emphasis. "I'm down an arm, Steve, and I'm pretty sure I won't be able to run if that thing finds us again. You still have that concussion, and I saw you fall on your ribs again. On top of that, we have no lead on a way out."

Steve winced. "Yeah, but we'll be fine. I'll make sure we're fine."

"Time's running out," Bucky said flatly.

"I...I know, Buck."

Bucky finally managed to push himself to his feet, hissing in pain as he put weight on his bandaged ankle. "Well if we're going to die, I don't want to do it here. Let's at least try to move."

Steve nodded silently, taking Bucky's arm when he offered it. He wasn't sure who was supporting who, but he was thankful for it.

Some time later, Steve saw the light.

For a moment he thought he'd just keeled over and died, his injuries overwhelming him. But then he blinked and Bucky was asking, "Do you see that too?" and he knew that he wasn't crazy. There was some kind of light ahead of them, warm and orange. It was *there*.

"That doesn't look like daylight," Bucky said in a low tone, and Steve agreed. He had no idea what it was, but it didn't look like anything he'd seen before.

As the two crept forward, they realized that the passageway was widening out again.

"Wait," Steve hissed. "We can't be sure if the monster is hiding in there."

Bucky shone the flashlight into the room. "We can, actually. Look—you can see the far wall from here. This is the only way in or out, and it's too small for the monster to fit through."

Blinking, Steve realized that he was right.

Buck turned off the flashlight so that all they could see was the warm orange glow. Then he was moving forward, cautiously, one step at a time, and Steve followed close behind.

The room was relatively small, but much larger than the tunnels they'd emerged from. Steve stared in awe at the intricate carvings on the walls, depicting scenes of war and glory, death and destruction. He'd never seen anything quite like it. The designs almost seemed to move in that orange light, twisting and writhing as if they were alive.

"What is this place?" Bucky whispered, tracing his fingertips along the stone.

Steve just shook his head, pacing further into the room. Then he turned to see the rest of the room, and he saw something even more amazing still.

The glow was coming from the far wall, the one directly across from the entryway. But more than that, it was coming from behind a carving of a broad, steadfast tree that started from the floor and branched out toward the ceiling, covering the whole wall. Each branch was outlined in orange light, making the entire wall glow.

Bucky approached it with caution, hand finding some kind of carving beside the tree. "Yggdrasil," he read. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I think...it's from Norse mythology, isn't it?"

Bucky took a step back. "I wouldn't know. Why do you think it's lit up like that?"

"Why is it all the way down here?" Steve countered. He approached the carving and put his hands on it out of curiosity. When he wasn't immediately killed, he decided that it must be safe.

Bucky shuffled, checking around the base of the tree. "Hey, Steve—check this out."

He dropped to his knees beside Bucky, following his gaze. There, near the floor, was a hole in the wall like a drawer had been pulled out. It was this large, cubical thing, all scraped out on the inside and buzzing with residual power like whatever had been in there was incredibly powerful.

"What is it?" Steve whispered.

Bucky didn't respond. Instead he rose, beginning to run his hands along the rest of the door in a search for more drawers. "I don't see any others," he said. "Except...hey, I think this is a seam!"

Steve got back up, feeling strangely drawn to the orange glow. He once again followed Bucky's gaze until he saw a faint seam along the door's center, right at the heart of the tree. When he reached out to pry it open, it gave without a fight.

He pulled the drawer out. The atmosphere was tense and almost electric as he did so, setting the compartment on the ground and staring at what was inside.

"Is that...a book?"

It was. It was a very, *very* old book with a brown leather cover and yellowed pages, sitting there like the most harmless thing in the world. The cover was completely blank.

Bucky frowned. "Weird...I wonder what's in it." He reached out as if to take the book, then recoiled with a pained cry.

Steve jolted and gasped, "Buck! What happened, are you okay?"

Bucky shook his hand like it'd been singed. "It's hot! It burned my skin!"

"How is that possible? It just looks like a normal book!" Steve squinted at it, waiting for something sinister to happen, but nothing did. It just sat there harmlessly.

"Something normal in a HYDRA base?" Bucky said drily, still shaking his hand. "You're losing your touch, old man."

Steve huffed. "How hot is it? Here, let me..." He hovered his hand over the book to feel its warmth, but...there was nothing. "Are you sure it burned you? It feels cool to me."

"Hey, don't touch—!"

But Steve had already reached out and grabbed it—and the instant he did, he felt this shock of *power* ripple through his entire being. It wasn't hot. It didn't hurt. But it did feel strange, like this faint buzzing in the back of his head, and for a moment he was afraid.

"Steve! Steve, are you okay? How is that thing not burning you?"

He frowned down at the book, uncertain. "It's not hot, Buck. I don't know what you're talking about."

"What?" Bucky reached out as if to take it, then recoiled immediately. "It's burning up!"

Steve held it up with a smile that probably looked like more of a grimace. "What, are you a

vampire now? Is this thing made of silver?"

Bucky shifted uneasily, taking a step back. "I don't like it, that's all. It's not natural."

"You said it yourself—it's in a HYDRA base. Nothing is natural."

"And nothing is *safe*. Put it down."

"Wait, what if it can help us?" Steve clasped the book between both hands, drawn to its energy. It didn't feel malicious, just...*pure*. Like it wanted to help him.

"Steve, I don't like it. Put it down."

"No, let me just—!"

Steve opened the book, and the entire room shifted. All of the light from the tree drained like water, trickling down branches, gathering in the trunk, and shooting through the floor until it reached the book itself. A moment later Steve was holding a glowing book.

Bucky broke the silence. "What did I tell you?"

"It might still be able to help us!" Steve looked down at the book, face illuminated by the glow. He turned a few pages. "Hang on...Buck! Buck, look at this!"

Bucky leaned over his shoulder to look at what he'd found. There, drawn across two pages of the book, were what looked like a series of rooms and hallways. The center was marked with an X, pathways branching out until they reached something labeled with the word *exit*.

"Holy shit," Bucky whispered. "Am I looking at what I think I'm looking at?"

Steve's heart was racing. "It's—Buck, I think it's a map!"

Bucky shook his head, eyes wide. "No way. No way it's that easy."

"*Easy*? We nearly died to get here!"

"Yeah, but that thing still came from a HYDRA base. How do you know it's not leading us astray? How do you know it's not a trap?"

"I can just feel it!" Steve traced his fingers along the page, following the lines of the corridors.

"Look, we have to be here where the mark is. If we follow the lines to the exit, we can get out!"

"It doesn't feel right. It feels like a trap."

"It won't be! Come on, what else are we going to do? We have a map, and you really want to *not* follow it? You want to run around aimlessly and wait to die?"

"I want to be *safe*."

"Yeah, well this is the only way we have a chance to be safe! Come on, you have to trust me here!"

Bucky took a step back. "I trust *you*, Steve. Not the book."

"Bucky..."

He looked away. "We can try following the map, because it's the only lead we have. But we'll have

to be extra careful along the way. This could still be some kind of trap—and on top of that, we can't run into that monster again. We don't want to mix with HYDRA's new weapon."

The tension bled out of him, and he turned his attention on the map. "Now...if we're here, and we need to get to the exit..." He ran his finger along the route. "Look—there's only one way to get out, according to this map, and it runs right along this path."

"What if that path takes us through some of those larger chambers? The monster could be waiting."

"Well it looks like there's only one way out, so we'll just have to find a way through."

Bucky's expression twisted. "Steve, I don't like this."

He groaned, "We have to get *out* of here. I'm not letting either of us die down here, and this is the only way."

Bucky still didn't look convinced. But he seemed to know that he didn't have much of a choice but to agree, because he didn't protest further. "Okay. Just...let's watch each other's backs."

"Of course."

He shook his head, uncertain, and took Steve by the arm. "Then let's get going."

They took off down the corridor, Steve leading the way.

"Buck, this is incredible!"

Bucky watched uneasily as Steve led them around another corner, using the continued glow of the book to read what was written there. He'd been glued to the thing for at least an hour, tracing their path to make sure they didn't get lost. They were both well aware that one wrong turn could mean death.

"Here, look at this—the map is completely accurate! It has every little thing marked." Steve held the book out for Bucky to see, and he took a look at the winding pathways obediently. He couldn't speak to their accuracy, seeing as he hadn't been paying attention, but he trusted Steve. He just hoped that the strange book wasn't leading them into a trap.

"Now if this stays accurate, we can just keep following this path here and get out."

Bucky eyed the tunnels suspiciously. They were beginning to open up a bit more, and he was worried that soon they'd be back within reach of the monster. He was sure that thing knew the tunnels better than they did, and that it would be able to make its way around to attack them again.

"You're quiet," Steve observed, raising his eyes from the book. "Are you feeling okay?"

No, actually, he wasn't. He was still a little light headed from blood loss and dehydration, and now on top of that he had to worry about Steve and the book that *definitely* wasn't as safe as he seemed to believe. But Steve was watching him, growing more concerned by the moment, so all he could do was smile and deny it. "I'm fine. Let's focus on getting out."

Steve frowned at him in return, then dropped his gaze back to the pages. "We're taking a right."

Bucky followed the curve of the corridor. "I wonder what that thing is supposed to be used for, and why it's down here."

"Don't know." Steve looked up. "Left."

They turned. "It just can't be good, Steve. What if it somehow created that monster?"

"It didn't. It feels too calm."

"You're talking like that thing has a personality."

Steve paused, and for the first time he looked a little perturbed. "I don't know how to explain it. It just feels friendly."

"That's not nearly as comforting as you seem to think it is."

"Okay," he said, "then how about this? We'll use the book to get out, and once we're there I'll hand it over to the other Avengers and let them do what they will with it. No getting attached, no getting corrupted. Everyone wins."

"Unless we both die, then no one wins but HYDRA."

Steve cringed and led them down another right. "Let's just pretend that that's not an option. Now, according to this we should about ready to hit the final stretch. We probably have something like thirty minutes of walking left, if I'm reading this right."

Bucky tensed as the chamber rumbled faintly. Those tremors had been coming and going for hours, intensifying each time, and he didn't want to think about how that meant that they were probably nearing the creature again. With their luck, it would be guarding the exit.

Or the exit would be blocked by rubble, too.

"There should be another turn right about...here! We just need to—"

Then he froze, and Bucky froze, because they were staring at another doorway leading into a massive chamber.

"No way!" Bucky hissed, keeping his voice down in case the monster was in there. "We can't expose ourselves by going in there, Steve! If the monster is here, we're dead."

"This is the only way through," Steve protested, though he looked equally disturbed. "The map says—"

"The map is going to get us killed!" Bucky shone his light into the chamber, remembering that the monster couldn't see. But all he saw was rubble from the explosions, and newly formed cracks along the walls that threatened complete collapse. "I don't see the monster, but that doesn't mean it's not in here."

Steve looked back at the book. "Maybe there's some other way around? On another page, maybe —"

Steve went very quiet, and the hair on the back of Bucky's neck stood on end in alarm. "What?" he snapped. "What is it?"

"Bucky..."

Bucky almost reached for the book before he remembered that he couldn't. So instead he peered over Steve's shoulder, got a peek at what he was looking at, and his stomach lurched. "Oh my god," he whispered. "Is that...?"

Steve shook his head in awe. "I...I think it is. Bucky, if this is real..."

All he could do was stare in shock. Because there, spread out across the pages of the book, was another kind of map entirely—and this one had marked out what looked like every HYDRA base in Germany.

"Turn the page," Bucky said sharply. "Is there more?"

Steve turned the page. This one was filled with a map of North America, more bases picked out with glowing orange dots. The next page was Africa, with only one base depicted. Then Australia with none, and Europe with maybe a dozen, and South America with three. There were more maps, but Steve was flipping quickly now so Bucky couldn't see them clearly.

"That monster isn't the weapon you heard them talking about," Steve whispered. "It's a guard. It was guarding *this*."

"HYDRA's most well kept secret," Bucky agreed. "But why would they have this down here? Why would they risk putting it all down on paper? And why does the thing *burn* me? It doesn't make any sense."

Steve flipped more pages, scanning the information. "Maybe there's more to this book than meets the eye."

"Obviously, since it hasn't stopped glowing since you opened it."

He flipped a few more pages, then returned to the map of the tunnel system. "We can be pretty sure this is accurate now, Buck. This is the only way through."

"It's still dangerous," he pointed out. "That thing could be lurking anywhere."

"Then we'll just have to be quiet and slip through."

It was a bad plan. Maybe the worst. But if they didn't take it, they'd die alone underground.

Steve pointed with the book. "I think there's a path going along the back wall of the chamber. If we keep low and quiet, we can make it across. Hopefully the tunnel will close back up once we're there, and the monster will be a thing of the past."

"That's a lot of uncertainty," Bucky huffed, but he was already shining the light in that direction. "I guess now is the part where we stop talking."

Steve gave a short nod and tucked the book under one arm. He flicked a wrist in the direction of the chamber, and then they were moving.

Bucky kept his light moving from place to place as they crept, looking for the monster. Steve had been right about there being a path along the back of the chamber, and they clung to the security of having an impenetrable wall at one side. They chose their steps carefully as they traversed the rocky landscape. Even one slip had the potential to bring the creature right to them.

It went well, as they crossed that massive chamber. There were trickles of sunlight coming in from the ceiling, which was how Bucky knew they were getting close to the surface as Steve had

promised. It was good, because every moment brought him a little closer to what he knew was an inevitable collapse. His ankle throbbed with every step, and his head was light and painful. He knew Steve was in an even worse condition.

When they neared the end of the chamber, Bucky's heart dropped. *It doesn't narrow out*, he realized. *The tunnels are going to stay this size until we reach the end of this underground area, and that means that the monster won't have any barriers in attacking us.*

Steve seemed to realize the same thing. He used his spare hand to take Bucky's arm, a request for comfort, and Bucky returned the grip with one of his own. *I've got you*, he thought, but he couldn't say it. Speaking was too dangerous.

Something rumbled.

They both froze at the same time, certain that death was coming for them. But when nothing immediately tore their heads off, Bucky raised his head in the direction of the sound. The beam from his flashlight penetrated the gloom, and he nearly passed out from the sheer terror of it all as he saw that there, on the ceiling, was the monster.

Steve was tense as a bowstring. *It's here*, he mouthed, though no sound escaped.

Bucky nodded and mouthed, *Is it awake?*

Not sure.

It growled again, but now Bucky thought that it might have been a snore.

Steve frowned. *It doesn't look hurt.*

Maybe it heals quickly? But looking at it, Bucky realized that Steve was right. The monster looked like it had never gotten into that fight with them. There wasn't a mark on it.

Steve tapped him and motioned for the doorway to the next chamber. No further words were exchanged as they crept toward it and slipped into the next room.

Bucky had to resist a sigh of relief. They'd ducked the monster, and if they stayed quiet then they could get out without waking it up. They just needed to—

Steve choked on a gasp, and Bucky froze in his tracks as he saw the monster again, somehow in front of them this time and stalking around the room. But when he looked back, he saw that the one from the last room was still there.

There are two of them!

Steve's fingers curled in the fabric of his sleeve. He held up three fingers.

No...there are three. Bucky shone the light in the other direction and shivered as he saw a third creature lying on the ground. If there were that many, there could easily be more.

And to make things worse, this room was much smaller.

As in, they'd have to step right over one of the creatures to get to the exit.

Steve paused for a moment, considering the situation. But there was no turning back, and he knew it—so he let go of Bucky's good arm and started to move, stepping even more lightly than before. The orange glow from the book gave everything this eerie sheen, making the monsters look even

more horrifying than they had to begin with. As Steve's foot landed an inch away from one of the sleeping creature's feet, Bucky sucked in a terrified breath.

The pacing monster raised its head and snarled, and Bucky cursed himself. They were so close that he'd heard his breath. It took a step toward him.

Steve tensed as if making to attack, but Bucky raised a hand to stop him. *Go*, he mouthed, pointing toward the door to the next room.

Steve paused. He didn't say anything, but his expression was one of frustration and fear.

Go, Bucky mouthed again, pointing more urgently at the door. The monster was stalking toward him. And Steve, though looking none too happy about it, finished stepping over the sleeping monster and ducked into the next chamber.

Bucky kept incredibly still as the monster approached. *If I can time my footsteps with its, I can avoid being heard*. So he stepped to one side as one of the creature's feet landed, repeating the process with the next and then the next. His training made it easy to move without making much noise, but this thing's hearing was incredible. He was convinced that every step might be his last. But the creature passed him, head raised high as if to see the intruder, and Bucky kept stepping in time with its footsteps as he slipped over the sleeping creature and into the next room.

Steve's hand landed on his shoulder the instant he was through. A reassurance. *We're almost through*.

The daylight was becoming more pronounced now, as they moved for the exit. There were two more creatures in that next room, bringing the total up to five, but they were both dozing in a corner so they managed to slip by without incident.

Steve checked the book again, then gestured to the large tunnel leading in an upward slope. "This is it," he whispered, so softly that Bucky could barely hear him even as close as he was. "The exit is at the end of this tunnel. It's a straight shot, no more chambers."

Bucky gave a tense nod, looking back into the previous chamber. In the gloom, he just barely caught the sight of one of the creatures starting to get up. They had to get out, and they had to do it now. Those creatures could hear or even smell them at any moment, and they'd been beaten up even trying to fight one of them. Now they were looking at five.

Something growled in the tunnel ahead.

Make that *six*.

Steve clutched the book to his chest like a lifeline. He took one careful step forward, lit by Bucky's flashlight, and peered into the tunnel ahead. If the monster was blocking the whole corridor, they'd have to sit back and wait for it to move.

That was when Steve froze, and Bucky assumed that he'd spotted the creature up ahead. His eyes tracked the line of his friend's arm, waiting to see the monster for himself, and...

Snap.

Bucky's heart leapt into his throat as his boot came down on something brittle, something he hadn't seen because it was half-buried in the dirt floor of the tunnel, and sent this horribly loud snapping noise echoing throughout the chamber.

Steve stared at him like he'd just grown a second head, and Bucky cringed. *Did I actually just become that guy? The guy that can't watch where he's going and gets the heroes killed because he steps on a—*

Bucky nearly choked as he realized that what he'd stepped on was a human bone. A very old, *very* corroded bone, probably from someone's arm. Shining the light on the ground, he saw that there were more of them all around. It was a miracle that they hadn't stepped on one sooner.

But of course, that wasn't what was important.

What was important was that behind them, another monster was appearing to block the exit to the tunnel.

Oh god. Bucky froze in place as the thing grew closer, making this strange clicking noise as if to find them through echolocation. It snuffled in the dirt, its six legs bringing it even closer still.

Bucky looked at the ground, to where the bone was snapped in two. The creature was only a few feet away. Taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, he stooped and grabbed onto one half of the bone. He hefted it in his good hand, drew back, and threw it as carefully as he could past the monster.

Clatter.

The thing whipped around with a snarl, and Bucky shoved Steve a little to get him moving. One careful step at a time, they started to inch their way up the tunnel. The volume of human bones began to grow larger as they went, though, making it harder to navigate without making noise. The monster was still too close behind them, still snuffling as it realized that the noise had come from nothing good to eat, and it raised its head curiously back in their direction as they moved.

We can do this, Bucky thought, gripping onto Steve tightly as he nearly stepped on what looked like a dilapidated skull. But just as he thought it, he looked up and realized that they had a problem.

There was about fifteen feet left before the tunnel terminated in what looked like some kind of stone door. But for those fifteen feet, the entire floor was covered in bones.

Steve hissed softly. He couldn't speak with the creature so close, but Bucky knew what he was thinking. *There's no way to move without making noise. If we take a step, we'll crack some of those bones and draw that thing right back to us.*

Bucky shot a glance behind them, where the creature was making its way back up the corridor. He stooped again to pick up another bone, and he chucked it down the hallway as far as he could. The creature retreated for a second time.

"Steve," Bucky whispered as it retreated, "we have to make a run for it."

Steve looked at him like he was insane. *"No!"* he whispered. "They'll kill us!"

"They'll kill us anyway if we don't get out." Bucky looked up, estimating the distance. "Five seconds to sprint up there, two to beat down the door, then we'll be out."

"And they'll be following!"

"The door is too small for them to fit through. We can do it."

Steve followed his gaze, expression conflicted.

But they didn't have time to think. The creature had just reached its furthest distance from them, sniffing at the bone on the ground, and Bucky knew that it was now or never. He took Steve by the arm, nodded once to communicate his intent, and ran.

The Great Escape

Chapter Notes

Well, I made it back in one piece! It's good to be back with my cats, that's for sure, though I will miss the theme park. And now that I'm back, I can focus on finishing this! There are just a few chapters left, and I hope you like them! I'd definitely appreciate the feedback if you do.

The creature screeched the instant it heard the bones clatter. And of course running in a sea of human bones was a lot harder than Bucky had calculated, so they lost a good five seconds as the thing closed in and the bones shifted and rolled beneath their feet.

"Buck, we're not going to—!"

"Run!"

The creature was closing in. Back in the other chambers, the others were beginning to roar and pace and head their way at the prospect of a good meal.

Then the creature reached them, and Bucky had to turn and punch as hard as he could to keep it from getting to Steve. "The door!" he yelled as Steve started to pause, to turn back for him. "Get the door!"

Steve whirled around and sprinted. But Bucky couldn't see what happened next, because the monster was slashing and he was throwing himself to one side as hard as he could to avoid the strike. The tunnel was wide but not wide enough, and he bumped into the wall as the thing's claws came whistling toward him. With his one remaining arm he punched at the monster's elbow and ducked the strike.

There was the sound of stone grinding on stone, only slightly louder than the sound of the other four monsters approaching.

"Steve, now would be nice!"

He gasped, and the sounds stopped. "It's stuck!"

"Oh you have *got* to be—"

But Bucky got no further as a second monster swept up the corridor and sprung at him. He rolled underneath the first, jamming a fist into its stomach as Steve continued to work on the door. Then he was on his feet and panting, ankle throbbing, head not too far behind, as he threw himself out of the way of the second monster.

Steve groaned, throwing his shoulder against the door, but nothing shifted. "I can't get it open!"

"We're both dead if you don't!" Bucky made to dodge again, but the tunnel was too small and the monsters were too large. He cried out as a claw caught him across the stomach, tearing right through his skin and leaving a sizeable gash.

"Bucky!"

He heard Steve starting to leave the door, planning to help him, and he lurched forward. "No, don't! The door!"

Blood dripped from his stomach as he turned back to the battle. The two almost seemed to be *taunting* him now, circling and lashing out and snapping whenever he stumbled. They were playing with their food.

Stone ground against stone for a third time, but nothing happened. Steve stepped away. "It's not working! I...I think I have an idea, though!"

"Well you'd better execute it fast!"

"Okay, okay..." Steve drew back from the door and turned, seeming to steel himself. "In three, two, one...Bucky, *get down!*"

He threw himself face first in the dirt without question, hooking his good arm over his head for protection. There was screeching from the monsters overhead, yelling from Steve, and then footsteps were racing past him. He didn't see what happened. But it must have been something incredible, because when he raised his head he saw that Steve was behind the two monsters and back at the beginning of the tunnel.

"Steve!" Bucky started, but his friend raised a hand urgently to stop him from speaking.

"I've got this!" he called. "Just—Bucky, get against the wall! I'm going to break us out!"

He realized immediately what Steve was going to do, and his heart leapt in his chest. But there would be no talking him out of it—hell, it might even *work*—so he scrambled to his feet and flattened his back against the wall of the tunnel.

"Okay, you monsters!" Steve yelled, waving his arms even though he already had their attention and they couldn't see. "Follow me!"

From there, Bucky could only watch.

Steve ducked around the monsters, rolling beneath one, flipping over another, dodging every swipe they tried to catch him with. Then he was sprinting at top speed up the tunnel, passing Bucky with a salute and charging at the sealed door. The monsters screeched and roared and followed behind, scrabbling in the dust.

And then, at the last moment, Steve lurched to one side.

Bucky closed his eyes as the monsters skittered past him, every one of them howling in surprise. But it was too late to slow their momentum, and so they went crashing into the door at full strength.

Concrete cracked. The entire system of tunnels rumbled.

"Now! Bucky, run *now!*"

He shoved himself off the wall just as the remaining three monsters appeared at the end of the tunnels, finally drawn by the noise. Then he was running, leaping over the dazed monsters that had put massive cracks in the door. Steve was there faster than him, beating at the door with all his strength. But it wasn't until Bucky was there, winding back and punching as hard as he could, that

the concrete splintered, creaked, and crumbled into pieces.

Daylight flooded their eyes, painful and blinding, and Bucky almost fell as he shoved himself through that door and up to the surface. Then he really *did* fall, his foot snagging on a branch, and he gasped as his slashed stomach came into contact with the rough forest floor.

"Hang on, I've got you!"

Bucky felt fingers curling into the back of his shirt, hauling him up and entirely free of the door. Then Steve was setting him down and collapsing, gasping for breath. There was blood at his throat, and Bucky reached out with one weak, rubbery arm to make sure it wasn't coming from him. All he found was a shallow cut, and he let himself slump against the ground in relief. Steve was okay. They were both okay.

Or at least, more okay than they could have been.

Bucky panted at the sky. His stomach was shot through with pain, and everything else felt pretty horrible too, but he was alive.

"T-think we're near the team?" Steve asked, voice dry and rough.

Bucky rolled onto his side with a groan. He could hear the monsters trying to fit through the entrance, but they were far too big and the door was far too small. "We'd b-better be," he groaned. "Don't think we c-can make it very far."

Steve propped himself up on his hands and knees. He looked like he was about a half second from passing out, but he managed it. "Geez, Buck...I d-did *not* think that was going to be t-that hard."

"Y-yeah, well I guess that dumb book was right."

Steve looked to one side and Bucky saw said book lying on the forest floor, stained with blood. It had saved their life.

"Come on," Steve rasped, getting to his knees. "W-we...we have to find the team. You're bleeding out."

"It's not that bad," Bucky protested, but he knew that it was. In his condition, the wound would kill him.

Steve staggered to his feet for a moment, then went back down on his knees. He gripped hard at the nearest tree trunk the next time he tried, and this time he stayed standing. "C'mon, Buck, we have to get you up."

He groaned as Steve pulled him to his feet, nearly falling over again in the process. Behind them, the monsters were still trying to escape. They had no idea how far they were from the team, if they'd traveled miles or yards, and they were hurt and exhausted and ready to keel over. But they were *so close*. If they held on for just a while longer...

Steve raised his head, taking in their surroundings. "I-I...I think we're close. If we just go over that rise—"

Something roared. There was the unmistakable sound of concrete cracking.

Then, as Bucky stared in horror, the walls around the door broke down and the monsters sprang out.

Steve didn't think he'd felt quite so bad as he laid there, panting from the exertion of breaking down the door, vision blurring around the edges, entire body buzzing with pain. That final sprint had taken everything out of him, and now all he could do was hold onto Bucky's shoulder and struggle to regain his breath. He was about ready to pass out.

But of course, that wasn't an option. His team was waiting for him.

So he rolled onto his hands and knees, fought to get Bucky back on his feet, and made his best attempt to start dragging him in the direction he thought the team would be digging. *If* they were digging, which was another issue entirely—but if he gave up hope he knew he'd lose the ability to fight, so he clung to that hope as tight as he could. He held Bucky to him with one arm and tried to walk away.

Or at least, he tried until the walls came down and the monsters surged after them with a combined roar that shook the forest.

Steve dropped Bucky in favor of using both hands to ward off the first monster, which threw itself at him viciously. His strength was faltering, but he still had enough to get beneath it and heave the thing to one side.

Bucky choked as he hit the ground, scrabbling to get his feet beneath him as a second monster went for him. "Steve—!" But he got no further, as the monster crashed into him and took him to the ground. Bucky vanished beneath a flurry of claws and fangs and limbs, and Steve cried out in horror.

Steve dashed for Bucky as the other monsters began to circle them, making sure they couldn't escape. He didn't care, though, not as he reached that second monster and drove his fists down into its back as hard as he could. His dwindling strength meant that it wasn't a firm blow, but the monster still roared and recoiled. It leapt off of Bucky and joined its brothers, circling them and licking its wounds.

"Buck!" Steve dropped to his knees beside his friend, shaking him by the shoulders. There was a nasty bite mark around one of his shoulders now, oozing blood.

Bucky shifted. His eyes were narrowed through the pain, teeth clenched. "S-Steve..."

One of the monsters snarled, and the circle grew just slightly tighter. Steve raised his head in alarm. He had no hope of fighting these things off. Not with his partner on the ground and his own body covered in scrapes and bruises. Not with his broken ribs and his lingering concussion. Not with his shoulder.

Another snarl. Steve staggered to his feet, putting himself over Bucky, and tried to watch all of them at once. *I have no weapon*, he thought frantically. *No shield. I need a shield!*

He looked around, but all he saw was the book. It was lying on the ground a foot away, which was strange because Steve thought he remembered seeing it quite a bit further in the distance. But he wasn't complaining as he reached down and grabbed the thing as if it might help him.

Steve raised the book to his chest. "B-Buck...I think this might be the end of the line."

Bucky groaned and tried to sit up, but failed. The ground was turning scarlet beneath him. "W-we had a good run, right?"

"Yeah, we did." Steve turned on heel as the monster behind him made a sound like it was readying for attack. But as soon as it saw him looking at it, it turned away. "At least w-we'll go out together, right?"

Bucky choked on a laugh. "I-I'd rather go out without you if it m-meant you'd live."

His heart broke a little, but he wouldn't let it show. He was going to stay strong until the end. "And I'd rather go out without you if it meant *you'd* live."

"T-then I guess we agree." Bucky took a deep, shuddering breath. "Together?"

Steve looked up at the monsters. They were starting to scrape their claws at the ground. They were going to attack.

"Yeah," Steve agreed finally. "Together."

One of the creatures howled, scratched at the earth, and hurled itself at Steve with all its strength.

His life flashed before his eyes. The monster was a blur of motion, all vicious fangs and dripping claws, and the only thing Steve could think to do was lean into it so it hit him instead of Bucky. Instinctively he raised the book to the monster, holding it out with both hands as if it could stop those claws from skewering him like a kabob.

As Steve closed his eyes and waited for the blow to fall, there was a flash of blinding orange light.

Clank!

Steve held his breath. He knew he was about to die, he just hadn't been expecting it to *take* so long. He wondered if the monster had already killed him, and he just hadn't felt it. Until...

"Steve! Steve, your—!"

He blinked, confused. Then he gasped, recoiling like he'd been burned, because not only was he alive, but the monster was screeching and writhing on the ground in pain.

Steve closed his fingers around what he thought was the book, confused. But then he looked down and saw it, and awed hope sparked in his chest.

The book was gone.

And in its place—a shield.

"Oh my god," he whispered. He held the thing up, the unearthly orange glow permeating the forest. It looked just like his shield, but made of this barely opaque light. And in the center of the star, the smallest chip of orange stone.

One of the creatures moved, recovering from its shock, and Steve had to act fast to stop it from killing either of them. He stepped forward, filled with this *power* he'd never felt before, and cracked his shield across the thing's head. It recoiled, howling, and leapt back. Then he was turning and raising an arm to the next monster, claws shrieking down the shield and burying themselves in the ground.

Still too many, Steve thought breathlessly, whirling around to catch another monster, then another.

He couldn't attack while he was standing over Bucky, keeping him alive.

The remaining monsters rallied together, a bit more cautious now that they knew that their prey wasn't entirely defenseless. They were circling again, as if trying to figure out the best way to take him down. With Bucky hurt and lying at his feet, it wouldn't be hard.

Steve saw it when they intended to attack again. One of them flung itself at him from the back, one from the front, and he had to swing around and snap his shield up to toss them both away. It was difficult—he was filled with new power, but his whole body was still buzzing with pain behind the adrenaline. He wouldn't last long.

Come on...one of you guys, give me an opening! I need to pick you off one by one if I'm going to stand a chance.

But there was no opening. They circled yet again, closing ranks, and Steve braced himself for the worst. Beneath him, Bucky curled tighter onto his side and braced for impact.

Luckily, that was when help presented itself.

"I've got eyes on them! Tony, the roaring is coming from over here!"

Steve's chest filled with relief as a familiar shape appeared in the sky, dropping out of the air to land beside him in a spray of dust.

Sam's wings folded into his pack, and he put a hand on his gauntlet. "Good to see you alive, Cap. We thought you'd gone down for good."

He laughed shakily. "Who, me? Come on, Sam, you know me better than that."

He raised a brow. "Right. New shield?"

Bucky groaned, trying to roll onto his side, and Steve shot him a nervous glance. "I'll explain later. Get him out of here, now!"

Sam looked to Bucky, and his expression hardened. "On it. Tony is inbound."

Steve hefted his shield as Sam took Bucky and flew. With his friends safe, there was nothing stopping him from attacking. His ribs screamed as he stepped forward and bashed at the nearest monster, the others skittering around behind him and trying to get at his exposed back. He was exhausted and in pain, but he had to fight and so he did. He turned when one slashed at him, leapt with another tried to go for his legs. His shield caught their claws, and his fists rained down upon them when they thought they'd gained the advantage.

There was the sound of thrusters overhead. "Cap!"

He didn't even look up, trusting Tony to have his back as he dealt with the creature in front of him. He smashed his shield into its neck, leapt on it once it was down, and bashed it as hard as he could in the skull. The shield splintered its skull like glass and squished its brain.

"I've got you!" Blue light washed through the forest. One of the monsters roared in agony, then fell as a beam of energy seared through its chest. Steve whirled around to see Tony standing there, shoulders squared at two of the remaining three monsters. He raised his palms and fired, and both went down hard. The last tried to run, but a beam of yellow seared through its brain and floored it. Vision appeared through the trees, expression one of shock, Wanda not far behind.

Steve panted, the adrenaline beginning to wear down. There was still this sense of strength coming from his arm, radiating outward and filling him with the belief that he could keep fighting. But there was nothing left to fight, and he knew he was injured and marginally less dehydrated and starved than Bucky, so he let his stance loosen.

"Hey," he said, exhausted. "About time you made it."

The others stared at him in mute shock.

Steve tried to straighten, then gasped as his injuries began to hit him full force. He'd never felt so awful.

"Cap—!"

Of all people, it was Tony that caught him when he fell. The orange shield was still strapped to his arm, and Tony avoided it like the plague, but he still held him and made sure he didn't hit the ground too hard. Steve would have appreciated it if he was feeling more lucid. "Hey, Tony," he muttered.

Tony shot a look back at the others. "Someone contact S.H.I.E.L.D. and have them prepare the med bay. He's hurt bad."

Steve couldn't be sure, because his vision was beginning to tunnel, but he thought he saw Vision take off to do just that. He laughed, though it was barely audible. It was *over*. They'd made it out. They were going to be okay. Bucky was—

Steve gasped in pain as power from the shield finally became too much, making his very bones vibrate. He needed to get it off, off, *off*—

As if on cue, the shield jolted with orange light. It raced through the shield like blood raced through veins, gathering in the center of the star and somehow *shifting* until the shield was gone, until it had turned into liquid light and reformed into what looked like some kind of gauntlet with a bright orange chip in the middle.

"Cap..." Tony reached out, trying to take the thing off of his arm, but he recoiled with a yelp a moment later. "It's hot!"

Strange...Bucky said the same thing. He laughed again, breathlessly, and let his head rest against Tony's thigh.

"Hey, *no*—Steve, come on, stay conscious! You could have a concussion!"

Oh, he was *so* far beyond that point. He felt like he'd been put through a blender.

Tony got to his feet, and Steve groaned at the feeling of being moved. "Wanda," the man said, "I'm bringing him in. Radio the others and tell them I've got him."

He didn't hear her response, because he was drifting. Had the sky always been that color? It seemed so *red*.

"Steve—!"

He slipped into darkness.

Moon and Sun

Chapter Notes

I forgot to say this last time, but have you guys been on the Guardians of the Galaxy ride in Disneyland (or technically California Adventure, I guess)?? Because hot damn, the whole thing is just so well executed and you seriously feel like you're a part of a mission. Also it was great to hear some additional dialogue and get to know the characters a little better for reasons that will soon become evident. I'm still excited about it and it was like two days ago!

But anyway, enjoy the second to last chapter! I really appreciate you guys chiming in, so thanks to everyone that's commented so far. You all keep me going!

Steve awoke in degrees.

First it was the sounds. There was this dreadful beeping in the background, this miserable drone that wouldn't let him rest, and he hated it. He just wanted it to be quiet. But the beeping never stopped, and the voices never stopped muttering, and so he shifted restlessly and fought to stay asleep.

When the sounds became too much, it was his taste that returned. He tasted blood in his mouth, blood *everywhere*. Irony and thick and disgusting, it coated his tongue and clung to the back of his throat. Even his teeth felt slick with the stuff, when he ran his tongue over them.

But even that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was when his sense of *self* returned, and he realized abruptly that he was in a world of pain.

Everything hurt. His ribs were throbbing so hard that he was sure the pulse was visible. His shoulder buzzed like it'd been dislocated and relocated for a second time. The thin slice on his neck oozed blood with every breath. And his *head*—pounding as if someone was literally standing there, inside his skull, and beating him with a metal rod. *Concussion*, he remembered, but it felt so far away that he barely registered it. All he felt was the pain.

As the pieces of his consciousness began to fit together, he found himself grasping at memories the past few days. He...was having a hard time figuring it all out. He remembered the fall, his injuries—*Bucky's* injuries—and their frantic scramble through the tunnels to avoid the monsters. But once they broke the surface, everything was a blur of light and color and motion and *power*. He remembered the power. He could still taste it.

His—his *arm*. The book. The shield. The...the gauntlet?

Steve groaned, shifting around as the pain spiked, and someone else in the room gasped in surprise.

"Oh no—um...Captain Rogers, can you hear me?"

The voice was familiar. He tried to open his eyes, but everything was immediately so *bright*.

"I can get the lights! Hang on..." Someone shuffled around. "Okay, they're off! Sorry, you weren't

really supposed to wake up right now. Mr. Stark was here, and he was going to talk to you but he left me in charge for like five minutes while he went up to talk to Bruce, and...yeah..."

And because there was only one person that called Tony *Mr. Stark*, it clicked.

Steve opened his eyes.

"Hey!" Peter said nervously. "Um—I shouldn't be here. Let me get Mr. Stark, or maybe literally anyone else."

He moved to go, but Steve stopped him with a look. "B-Bucky," he rasped, and his voice scraped like sandpaper along the inside of his throat.

Peter jumped. "O-oh—he's fine! I think..." He shuffled. "Let me go get Mr. Stark."

Steve could only watch as Peter left the room, looking flustered. All the medical stuff probably made him nervous after what had happened a few months back.

There was a pause, then, as Peter presumably went to get Tony. While he was gone, Steve took stock of his surroundings. He soon found that he was in a small room filled with medical equipment, most of which was hooked up to some part of his body. The monitors were the source of the beeping he'd heard.

Looking down at himself, he wasn't surprised to see that he'd been dressed in a papery green hospital gown. The skin he could see was mottled with dark bruises, and there was a brace around his ankle. Funny...he didn't even remember hurting it. Looking further up, he spotted some kind of plaster cover sticking out from under the gown where his broken ribs were. They must have shifted, and the doctors had gone in to reset them.

Then he saw his arm.

Steve blinked at the gauntlet strapped there. It was made of a mesh of leather, gold, and silver, starting at the wrist and climbing to just below the elbow. There were these bright orange *veins* stretching across it, weaving around to the back of his forearm. When he turned his arm, he saw that the veins culminated in that same orange stone he'd seen while he was fighting the monsters. Only now, the glow was gone. It just looked like a normal gauntlet.

Steve wondered how long it would stay in that form. So far he'd seen the thing become a book, a shield, and now this, so he wasn't sure what he was dealing with. He didn't know what it *was*. All he knew was that it was incredibly powerful, enough to set his hair on edge just from looking at it. it wasn't something to be messed with.

There was a knock in the doorway. "Rise and shine, Cap! Peter tells me you're all healed up."

Steve shot an exasperated glance at Tony, who was standing there looking at him with an air of caution. Following his gaze, Steve saw that he was looking at the gauntlet strapped to his arm.

"How are you feeling?" Tony asked, taking a few steps into the room.

Steve took a moment to consider. He hurt, and it was awful, but it was the kind of hurt that would fade with time. "I'm okay," he decided. "Just...a little achy."

"I'm sure that's all it is," Tony said, shaking his head. He stopped next to Steve's bed and pulled a chair around, sitting on it backward and crossing his arms over the backrest. "You're the first one up, so do you want to tell me just what the hell happened down there?"

The first one up? "Hey," he rasped, "is Bucky...?"

"Fine," Tony confirmed, but his voice was tight. "Not awake just yet, but the doctors stitched him up."

Of course—Tony's voice wasn't strained because Bucky was still hurt, it was strained because he just didn't like him and didn't want to deal with him.

"You'll be okay too, for the record," Tony said. "You were hurt pretty bad when we got you in here, but it didn't take too much effort to piece you back together."

"Comforting," Steve grumbled. He shifted, propping himself up against the pillows. "Where are we?"

"The compound in New York. But you didn't answer my question—what the hell happened back there? What were those monsters? What's that thing on your arm? Where *were* you?"

Steve raised his arm again, and the chip of stone caught the light. "We fell," he remembered.

"Yeah, I remember that." Tony crossed his arms. "We found your shield, you know. We—we thought you might have been dead."

"What?"

"You heard me. Your shield was buried deep, and when you weren't with it we feared the worst. How were we supposed to know you'd—what, fallen even further?"

"Into a series of tunnels beneath the base," Steve confirmed. "Bucky and I...we fell straight down and ended up buried."

"It's a miracle you survived," Tony said. "We found the remnants of those tunnels you're talking about, and they completely caved in after you got out."

The monsters, Steve remembered. *They cracked the last of the supports when they escaped, and the whole series of tunnels collapsed.*

"What was down there?" Tony asked. "We have no way of telling now that the tunnels are all destroyed. And based on those creatures, it must have been good."

"It was..." Steve trailed off, shuddering. He didn't want to remember the horror of being down there, the cold understanding that they most likely wouldn't make it out. "It was dark," he said finally. "Dark and cold and awful. The tunnels probably stretched for miles, all spread out like a maze. If we hadn't found a flashlight, we might not have made it as far as we did. There was no natural light that deep."

Tony gave a slow nod. "Could you see where the monsters were coming from?"

"I think they were just *down* there," Steve said. "I don't know. Bucky and I traveled for hours before we started to hear the roaring. But once we did, we came across the first one really fast. It tried to kill us. We barely escaped. Then we kept going, but eventually we figured out that there was more than one monster. I'm not sure how many there were, or how they were made, but I think HYDRA put them down there as guards."

"But what were they guarding?"

He shot a glance at his gauntlet. "This."

Tony made this low sound, like he didn't even want to look at the thing. "What is that, exactly? No one has been able to touch it, let alone get it off you."

"Really?" Steve put his hand over the thing, and it thrummed beneath his fingers. He pulled, and it gave obediently until it was just a gauntlet sitting in his hand. He held it up for Tony to see. "It came off for me."

"It seems to be doing a lot of things for you, Cap. Do you know what it is?"

He set the gauntlet in his lap. "No, actually. At the center of the tunnels, Bucky and I found this *room*. It was covered in these carvings, and at the far wall there was one of a giant tree. It had compartments, and this was in one of them. But—and this is going to sound insane—it was originally a *book*."

"A book," Tony said flatly.

"Yeah. It's just—I wonder if I can—?" Steve held the gauntlet, willing it to become a book again, but nothing happened. It stayed firmly a gauntlet. "It's not working now, but it's transformed twice. When I first found it, it was a book that had a map of the chambers and all of HYDRA's remaining bases."

"*All* of the remaining—?"

"I'll tell you later." Steve put the gauntlet back in his lap. "I used it to navigate the tunnels. But then we got caught and nearly died, and just when a monster was about to take me down, I held it up and it shifted into a shield."

"That I saw," Tony said. "Not the transformation part, I mean. Just the shield. It was all... *glowy*."

"Yeah..." Steve ran his fingers across the metal absentmindedly. "And after the fight was over, it molded around my arm and turned into this thing."

Tony shook his head and said, "If you found it in a HYDRA base it can't be good."

"It feels friendly."

He stared at him like he'd lost his mind. "It was in a HYDRA base, Rogers. And I'm sure I don't have to remind you of this, but the last experiment to come out of a HYDRA base nearly ended in our deaths."

"It saved my life, and Bucky's." His grip on the gauntlet tightened. It felt like a friend. "We would have died down there without a map, and we would have died again without that shield."

"It's getting into your head," Tony cautioned. "We'll have to take it away for testing, to know if it's safe."

Safe. The world flicked some switch in his head, and then he was sitting up far too quickly for his stitches. "Oh, *no*—Bucky said something about some kind of new weapon being developed to fight us! Did you find it in the rubble? If you didn't it's still down there; we'll need to go back! If something like Venom escapes into the civilized world—!"

Tony shook his head, perturbed. "I don't want to jump to conclusions," he said, "but I think you might be holding the weapon."

Huh? The...the gauntlet?

"It was being kept under close guard beneath a HYDRA base," Tony reasoned. "I'm sure there's more to it than meets the eye, and a *lot* is meeting the eye right now." He gestured to the bedside table. "Set it down, Cap, and we'll take it for those tests."

"How are you going to test it if you can't touch it?"

"I'll manage." Tony stepped forward, moving as if to take it. "*Ow!* Son of a bitch, it's still hot!"

Steve frowned at the thing, balanced calmly in his hand. "Hey," he said. And he had this weird feeling that what he was doing was right, so he said, "Let Tony handle you."

He sounded insane, talking to an inanimate object. But when Tony reached his hand out again, hovering over the metal, he didn't flinch away.

"...Weird," Tony said as he closed his fingers tentatively around the gauntlet. He held it up to the light, an expression of distaste creasing his features.

"Just..." Steve looked after the gauntlet, this weird sense of longing hitting him right in the core. "Be careful with it, okay? I don't think it's something we should mess with."

"And yet you want to keep using it?"

"I—I don't know, Tony. This whole thing is strange."

"You're telling me." Tony turned, snatching a towel off a nearby tray and wrapping the gauntlet up. "Well, I guess everything is resolved. You're safe, the gauntlet is being shipped to Banner for *extensive* studying, and the HYDRA base is wiped out."

Steve stared. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, I'm sorry—am I forgetting something?"

He narrowed his eyes and said, "Bucky."

Immediately, Tony's expression hardened. "I don't see anything to talk about there. I've said my piece, now leave me alone."

"He's in the compound now, isn't he?"

"He was hurt. Even I'm not enough of a piece of shit to let him die when I know..." He trailed off, swallowing hard. "...When I know how much he means to you."

"But you wanted to kill him, didn't you? You've wanted to kill him for a long time. Now he's here, and you have that opportunity."

"Not while your friends are around. Sam would have my head for hurting him, even if he hates the guy himself, and the same goes for Wanda and Natasha. If you think I'm crossing all of them at once, you have another thing coming."

"So you're only keeping him safe because you know you'll be attacked if you don't."

"I know I'll start another war."

"I thought I was the one doing the starting, traipsing off to Germany with half of the team."

"Yes—no! It's just..." Tony groaned, running a hand through his hair. "Look. Barnes is here now, and that's all that matters."

"No, that's not all that matters!" Steve leaned forward, then winced as his ribs protested. "What matters is that you still can't accept Bucky as a part of this team, and I don't trust you to keep him alive in the future!"

"He's not my responsibility, he—!"

"He's a member of the team," Steve said shortly. "Of *our* team, Tony. The Avengers are just as much mine as they are yours, and I want Bucky as a member of the group."

Tony bristled. "He's a murderer."

"So are you!"

He stopped, pain flickering across his face. "Don't say that," he rasped. "Don't you think I know what I've done?"

"Don't you think *Bucky* knows?"

Again, Tony paused. "We're different. Barnes has—!"

"If your main criteria for joining the team is that you're not a murderer," Steve said, "then we've got a lot of thinning out to do. Wanda blew up half a building of civilians just last year. Natasha has killed dozens of innocent people, and even more that aren't so innocent. So has Bruce as the Hulk. Hell, Peter took out five people less than two months ago while he was under Venom's control! And I've killed too, Tony, don't you forget it! We all have. So if you're really saying that murderers aren't welcome in the Avengers, there won't *be* any Avengers."

Tony looked like he'd swallowed something sour. "It's different. Barnes worked for HYDRA. He—he killed my *mom*."

"God, Tony, I know! I know what he's done is unforgivable, and I'm not asking for you to forgive him! I'm just asking you to look beyond his programming and see *him*."

He didn't speak. He just glared at the ground and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Bucky had as much control over what he was doing as Peter did," Steve continued. "It wasn't his fault he was captured by HYDRA. It wasn't his fault he was turned into a weapon. And it sure as hell wasn't his fault that he killed your mom. It was *awful*, Tony, I'm not denying that. But you have to understand that he had no idea what he was doing, and couldn't stop it! We can only blame the HYDRA agents that turned him into the Winter Soldier."

"I—" Tony cut himself off, choking on his words. "I *can't*. I see his face, and all I can see is the fact that he murdered one of the only good people in my life."

Steve looked down. He knew that he could never expect Tony to forgive Bucky. But at the very least, he wanted them to be able to tolerate each other. He wanted Bucky to be an Avenger. If Tony wouldn't let him within five miles of the compound without trying to blow his head off, that wasn't going to happen.

"It's just..." Tony turned away, like he couldn't stand to look at him. "How the hell am I supposed to let the guy that killed my mom be a part of this team? I'll get him killed, Rogers, you know I will. I'll be reckless with his life, and he'll die."

"You won't," Steve said. "You...you have a good heart, Tony. You just don't know how to use it sometimes."

"Not that good." Tony tapped at the arc reactor.

"Better than you give yourself credit for. I know that Bucky did something he'll never be able to make up for, that he robbed you of the only family you had. But you have a new family now, right? You have Pepper. You have Peter."

Tony half turned back, a reluctant smile beginning to form. "Idiots for putting up with me, the both of them."

Steve's expression softened. "Bucky's programing is gone," he said. "And you have a family again. No one will ever be able to replace your mom, and no one will ever be able to make up for what happened to them. But don't you think that maybe, after all this time, we stand a chance at starting over?"

He closed his eyes for a long moment, head tilted down. By the time he opened them again, Steve was beginning to feel nervous. But then Tony shook his head and said, "Maybe you're right." And that was enough.

"Barnes will never be my friend," Tony said. "I'm never going to like him, and I'm never going to forgive him—and I'm sure as hell always going to blame him, at least on some level. But you seem to trust him, and everyone else was willing to fight for him, so..." He threw his hands up. "I'm outvoted."

"And?"

"And..." He hesitated. "Maybe we all deserve a second chance. Or...even a third."

Steve's chest flooded with relief. "Thank you, Tony. Seriously."

Tony just shrugged and said, "You don't have to thank me. It's in everyone's best interests that I don't try to kill Barnes."

"Right," Steve said. "But still...thank you."

"Yeah, yeah...now, you said something about seeing a map of all the HYDRA bases remaining in the entire world?"

He blinked. "Oh, of course—I can give some to you now, but Bucky has always been better with maps; I bet he remembers more than I do. I can start by telling you—"

Tony raised a hand, cutting him off. "Don't bother. I'll...get it from him myself."

Steve blinked, surprised. "Okay. Just...tell Bucky I'll be there to see him as soon as possible."

"Already done." Tony bundled the cloth-wrapped gauntlet to his chest and stepped through the door. "See you soon, Cap."

So Steve watched, a mix of stunned and hopeful, as Tony walked in the other direction.

Quill

Chapter Notes

Woo, last chapter! I guess now is as good a time as any to thank you for the support, and to tell you to keep an eye on my account for future stuff if you like my writing. I've been saying it since part one, but I have big things planed! And of course, please do leave your parting thoughts on the story! I'd absolutely love to hear from you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"We've got it," Steve said in awe, watching as Tony typed in the final coordinates. "A complete map of every HYDRA base in the world."

The other Avengers, gathered behind them in anticipation of seeing the finished map, buzzed with excitement. They'd been working on recreating the map for a week, which had been difficult even with Bucky's photographic memory and Steve's extended contact with the book, so it was a relief to finally have it done.

Steve just wished that he'd been allowed to have the gauntlet back and try to turn it into the book again. Then they could have been even more certain than they already were that they were looking at the real deal. But Bruce was still running experiments on the gauntlet (*"It's incredibly similar to the tesseract and Loki's scepter, guys. Like, the energy signature is nearly identical."*), so Steve had been forbidden from holding it again.

"Then we're done," Bucky said calmly, placing his newly restored metal arm on Steve's shoulder. There had been talk of asking Wakanda for a vibranium arm, but it was still in development so he was back to regular metal. "We know exactly where they are, all across the globe. All that's left is eliminating them."

"We can do this," Steve agreed. He looked to the others. "With this information, HYDRA will never be a threat again."

Tony nodded. "We have to move fast though, guys. Take them out before they can split off and build more bases that aren't on this lovely little map. I motion that we start planning our next move immediately."

"Seconded," Steve said, and Bucky gave a firm nod at his side.

"I don't see why not," Natasha said, cracking her knuckles. "They owe us about three months of pain at this point; I say we start taking it back."

"Oh yeah," Clint snickered, "that'll feel good."

Wanda hooked an arm around Vision and agreed, "They won't know what hit them."

"They'll wish they'd never started their experiments," Sam agreed, as Peter bounced up and down excitedly beside him. His summer vacation was practically over, but they had just enough time for one or two more missions before their youngest member was shipped back to Queens.

"Meeting room in ten?" Tony suggested, pulling away from the hologram of the map. "We can

bring snacks."

"Sounds good," Steve said, smiling at the sight of Peter already starting to run circles around his mentor, asking about mission times and locations and whether or not he'd be allowed to go. "Buck, want to head outside for a minute?"

Bucky didn't protest. "Of course."

Steve led him out of the room. Sam was frowning suspiciously behind him, but that was a conversation for another day. He ducked through a door and down a hallway, and then they'd reached one of the balconies on the second floor. Well, *balcony* might have been a bit of a tame word for the giant outdoor space filled with tables and chairs and kept fenced in by thick iron railing. It was a good place to think, high enough to provide a good view of the surrounding fields.

The doors slid shut behind them, and then they were alone.

"So," Bucky said. "What did you drag me out here to talk about?"

"Hmm?" Steve paced forward, hands in his pockets, and looked out across the grasslands around them. The sun was searing toward the horizon, and it cast everything in a beautiful pink glow.

"You didn't just want to go outside for no reason, right? There's something you wanted to talk about."

"Oh, that." Steve laughed, shaking his head. "I just...wanted to savor the moment, I guess. Stand with me?"

Bucky raised a brow suspiciously, but joined him at the railing. "We haven't had a good conversation since the tunnels," he pointed out.

"I guess not. Things have just been so hectic, what with recreating that map."

"Yeah." Bucky scuffed his feet against the floor. "About that...I guess now is as good a time as any to say that I was wrong about the book. It saved our lives, and I should have trusted your judgment."

"Save the apologies for when we know if it's dangerous or not," Steve said. "If Bruce finds some kind of mind control device implanted in it or something, you can gloat all you want."

"It still saved us." He looked down. "*You* saved us."

Steve smiled. "You saved me plenty of times, Buck. I'm just glad we both made it out."

"...Yeah. I'm glad about that too."

"And you've been fitting in pretty well! I think Sam is warming up to you."

Bucky snorted. "Maybe in your dreams."

"Okay, okay," Steve laughed, "maybe that one was a long shot. But I do think that Peter likes you, and Natasha seems to have forgotten all about those times you tried to kill her."

"Parker would like anyone," Bucky countered. "And Natasha hasn't forgotten. None of them have."

Concerned, Steve shot him a glance. The pinkish glow to his face didn't hide his sad expression. "Are you not happy here? Are...are you thinking of going back to Wakanda?"

"I'd be more welcome there. But—no, I can't go back now. I have a few things to take care of here before I go running off again."

"So you *will* run off again."

Bucky reached out, sealing the fingers of his metal arm around the railing. "Yeah, probably. But for the record, you're invited this time."

He blinked. "What, invited to run and leave the Avengers behind?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Buck..." He trailed off, not quite sure what to say. He cared about his friend, probably more than he cared about anyone else. But the Avengers had become something of a family, too, and if it came down to making that choice...

"It's okay," Bucky said, reading his expression. "I'm not expecting you to choose me. Just...if you wanted, you'd have a place."

His heart bled with warmth, and he patted Bucky on the back affectionately. "Thank you. But what if...?"

Bucky looked over at him. "What if *what*?"

"What if I asked you to join *me* this time? Not forever, just for now."

"Join you as in...?"

"Nothing concrete," he said quickly. "Just run with me for a while. See how you like it. And maybe, if the Avengers warm up to you..."

Bucky shook his head, amused. "I told you, I'll run away again eventually. But I'm here for now. I'll be a part of your team again."

"Just like in Germany," Steve said. Then, realizing he had to narrow it down, "Like the old days."

"Like before I got *this*," Bucky raised his metal arm. "I understand, Steve. I just... Well, something feels *off* to me."

"What do you mean?" he asked, alarmed.

Bucky looked out over the field, expression grim. "We made it out," he said. "We lived, we killed the monsters, we got our hands on what HYDRA was developing as their next weapon. But still... something feels wrong. There's something in the air."

"Just a bad feeling?" Steve suggested.

Bucky looked down. "Maybe. But whatever it is, I can't shake off the feeling that something's coming. Something big."

Steve's chest suddenly felt a little tighter. "Like what?"

And again, Bucky refused to meet his gaze. His fingers clenched atop the railing. "A storm," he whispered.

"Then..." Steve hesitated, not quite sure how to respond. "Whatever this storm is, we'll just have to

stick together and see it out. We can do that, right? If we survived those tunnels, we can survive anything."

"Right," Bucky said with a weary smile. His grip on the railing released a bit, and he leaned back. "I already promised—I'll be with you for whatever comes next."

"Until the end of the line?"

He nodded, determined, and his troubled expression faded just a bit. "Until the end of the line."

Steve looked back across the field, to where the sun was beginning to dip below the horizon. Bucky was a solid presence at his side, head raised, looking to the future, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so at peace. They had a map of all remaining HYDRA bases. They had Bucky back. They had *everything*. Even if Bucky's bad feeling led to something major, they still had each other.

Soon HYDRA would be gone forever. And once that happened, Steve planned on taking a nice, long vacation. Maybe even to Wakanda, with Bucky.

"It'll be good to rest for a while," he whispered, but he didn't think Bucky heard it.

There were footsteps behind them. "Hey, you two! Stark wants us back in the conference room in three."

Steve turned to see Wanda standing in the doorway, arms crossed. "We'll be there soon," he said. "Let Tony know that—"

Bang!

Steve nearly jumped out of his skin as this awful sound rumbled through the air, shaking the ground and rattling the windows. For a moment he thought it had been some kind of weapon firing, and he whirled around fully prepared to see Bucky hit. But Bucky was standing there unharmed, wide-eyed and staring at the sky.

Steve followed his gaze. He looked right up into the sky, mostly dark now that the sun had slid beneath the horizon, and he saw *fire*.

Something was burning in the sky. Something was spitting out smoke and fire and wild sparks of electricity, crashing toward the earth at breakneck speed. Something was racing toward the grasslands outside the compound, as large as a truck, and Steve had no idea what it was.

There was another bang, and this time Steve saw something explode on the thing. It almost looked like an engine was out. But even through the fire the thing looked foreign, *alien*, so he couldn't be sure.

Wanda reacted first. "Rogers, that's a craft!"

"I'm sorry, *what?*"

"There's—someone's in there, I can feel it!" Wanda lifted into the air before Steve could move to stop her, flying over the railing and reaching out to encase the object in scarlet.

"Wanda, wait! We have no idea what—!"

But she was already in action, gasping in pain as her powers strained to slow the craft down. It was

simply moving too fast.

"It's going to hit! Take cover!"

Steve and Bucky threw themselves to the ground as Wanda cried out, doing everything in her power to stop the thing before it struck earth. Steve couldn't see it, face pressed against concrete, but he did hear the horrible sound it made when it crashed. Metal shrieked and tore, peeling around the edges, and another explosion rang out. It was loud—so loud that in a matter of moments, the others were racing to find the source.

Tony got there first. "Oh my god—FRIDAY, send me a suit! Have fire suppression at the ready!"

Steve watched in shock as Tony's suit appeared out of nowhere and molded around him, the man taking off and landing beside the craft that had crashed not fifty feet from the compound. White foam sprung forth from some part of the suit, and the fire was put out a moment later.

"Steve." Bucky was grabbing his arm. "We have to get down there."

He moved in slow motion. He leapt over the railing and hit the ground, jogging along with the other Avengers to the site of the crash landing. By the time they got there, Tony was working on peeling up the steel door.

"Cap, I could use some help!"

"No, I've got it!" Peter leapt forward and grabbed onto the door, peeling it back like it was made of plastic. He threw it to one side, where it crashed and laid still.

"I've never seen tech like this," Tony babbled as he started to wave away the smoke, hoping to reveal whatever horrible creature was waiting inside the pod. "It's familiar but it's not, it's like someone took earth tech and combined it with something *other*. It's—it's *alien*, guys."

"Wouldn't be the first time we've come across an alien," Bucky said in a low tone. He reached out to help Tony chase away the smoke, until—

Steve's blood ran cold.

"That's—" Tony stopped, stunned. "That's a *human*."

"Not for long, if we don't get him out!" Bucky was already reaching into the pod and grabbing the man by the shoulders, ripping away the security belts and laying him out on the ground next to the pod. He was injured—there was what looked like a cauterized stab wound in his stomach, slashes to his upper arms, burns along his skin—but he was definitely human.

"Who is he?" Steve whispered, dropping to his knees beside the man. He had this swooping brown hair that was plastered to his face with sweat, and heavy stubble all along his jaw. His long, red leather jacket was scorched and filled with holes, and his shirt wasn't faring much better.

"Nothing good," Wanda said, tone one of awe. "He is not of this world."

"But he's human!"

"Only half. His mind...it is strange."

"Well, can you wake him up?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but his mind is shielded from me."

"That doesn't explain—!"

There was more, but Steve was too busy looking at something in the man's jacket that had caught his eye. Something bright purple and glowing, reminding him of the orange warmth of the book but in a different color. Fascinated, he reached out.

"Steve," Bucky warned. But he didn't listen.

There was a tear right over the jacket's right pocket, and Steve made that tear worse as he yanked at the source of the purple. Once he got it free, he was surprised to find himself holding some kind of silver orb with a crack down the center. From that crack, something shone with intense *power*.

"Hey now," Tony said, finally spotting what he was up to. "Let's not get so handsy with things we don't—"

The strange man sucked in a choking breath, jolting back to consciousness, and flailing in Steve's direction. His eyes were a terrified greenish color, cracked lips parting in an attempt at speech that failed.

"Easy!" Steve soothed, catching his hands before they made contact. He held the orb to Tony, who took it gingerly. The purple glow set his face alight. "You're safe. We're not going to hurt you."

"N-no, the *stone*—!"

Steve looked back at the object in Tony's hands, suspicious. "You mean the orb? It's safe too. Everything is going to be okay. Can you tell me your name, or what happened?"

The man's expression crumpled into one of agony. "G-Gamora...!"

Steve frowned. "What?"

"S-she...she's...*oh god*..." The man yanked on his hands. When Steve released them, the man covered his face and shook like he was crying.

Steve looked up to Tony. "Inside?" he asked.

Tony gave a disturbed nod. "Inside," he agreed. "FRIDAY, tell Banner we've got an incoming patient. We'll want restraints until we figure this out. Oh, and dispatch a vibranium containment unit for whatever this orb is."

FRIDAY must have agreed, but Steve didn't hear it. He was too busy watching the man as he trembled, clinging to himself as if in an attempt to hold himself together. He looked like he'd been through hell.

Steve jumped as Bucky put a hand on his shoulder. "A storm," the man said lowly, and Steve shivered.

Wanda lifted the man with her powers, starting to float him back to base, and the others began to follow. Steve was left standing there, the last light of the dying sun illuminating the crash site. Something in his stomach was twisting, low and dark, and he was afraid.

Bucky drew up beside him. "Are you okay?"

He shook himself and forced a smile around this dark, dangerous lump in his throat. "I think I understand that feeling now, Buck. That something's happening."

The man did nothing other than offer him a nod.

Steve shook himself in an attempt to dispel the unease. Then he was reaching for Bucky's shoulder, holding tight. "Let's go. We've got work to do."

They walked back to the compound together. And above them, barely concealed by the smoke, a storm was beginning to gather.

Chapter End Notes

Now what is HE doing there? This is supposed to be an Avengers story, not a Guardians story! This should be interesting...

Part three will launch in exactly one week, so tune in Monday for the next leg of the journey! We'll be off to the furthest reaches of the galaxy to see what the crew of the Milano have been up to during parts one and two.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!